

**AMSTERDAM
STORIES**
NESCIO

INTRODUCTION BY
JOSEPH O'NEILL

JAN HENDRIK FREDERIK GRÖNLOH (1882–1961) was born in Amsterdam, the oldest of four children. After an idealistic youth, he joined the Holland–Bombay Trading Company in 1904, becoming director in 1926, suffering a nervous breakdown leading to a short hospitalization in 1927, and retiring at age fifty-five, on December 31, 1937; he married Aagje Tiket (b. 1883) in 1906 and had four daughters with her, born in 1907, 1908, 1909, and 1912. Meanwhile, as Nescio (Latin for “I don’t know”; he adopted a pseudonym so as not to jeopardize his business career, acknowledging his authorship publicly only in 1929), he wrote what is now considered perhaps the best prose in the Dutch language.

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Selected and translated from the Dutch by

DAMION SEARLS

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INTRODUCTION

It seems extraordinary that Nescio should have any reputation. He wrote very little, and he wrote small. Only four of his stories are of any length—"The Freeloader" (thirty-one pages), "Young Titans" (twenty-eight pages), "Little Poet" (forty-two pages), and "Insula Dei" (twenty-five pages). His standing becomes all the more unlikely when one considers how little time he allocated to sitting down to write. From the dates he appended to his finished work, it appears that his productive composition of fiction was limited to a handful of years scattered between 1909 and 1942, with almost nothing written in the 1920s and 1930s. How many important artists have been such slight practitioners?

Nescio's work is highly preoccupied with the vexing, tragically lopsided proportions of human endeavor. Two of the above-mentioned stories use ironic diminutives, in their Dutch titles, to tenderly cut down to size their protagonists: "Dichtertje" ("Little Poet") and "Titaantjes" (most naturally rendered, to my ear, by the Scotticism "Wee Titans"). All of Nescio's writing is framed by the problem of a life's smallness, and almost all of it is concerned with the grandiose struggle of young men, or men who were once young, against the compulsory dimensions of experience—metaphysical bafflement, the inseparability of desire and suffering, the demands of duty and work and social respectability. Not for nothing, in this context, is the English word *plight* (a bad situation) related to the Dutch word *plicht* (duty, obligation):

I sit on the hill and look down into the valley of obligations. It is barren, there is no water, there are no flowers or trees in the valley. A lot of people are milling around, most of them drooping and misshapen and constantly looking down at the ground. Some of them look up every once in a while and then they scream

The Nescio who wrote so gloomily in November 1922 was a forty-year-old who had published a single volume of stories and whose pen name means "I don't know" in Latin. His public self was a businessman named J.H.F. Grönloh, a paterfamilias responsible for the care and upkeep of a wife and four daughters and in possession of no realistic option but to allow his days and years to be put at the service of the Holland-Bombay Trading Company, an enterprise devoted to the exportation of goods to India. This state of affairs never ceased to amaze and perplex Nescio, and not only because, like many writers, he was given to amazement and perplexity. He came of age when the social and existential predicament of the clerical classes was coming under unprecedented literary scrutiny, not least from the clerks themselves. Nescio (b. 1882) was a contemporary of Franz Kafka (b. 1882) and Robert Walser (b. 1878).

He was the son of an Amsterdam shopkeeper. At a very early age he fell in love with taking walks and as a nine-year-old began to go on solitary outings, making written records of his impressions. (Walking—in and around the margins of Amsterdam and farther afield in the Netherlands—became a passionate lifelong pursuit.) In 1899, the year he graduated from trade school and embarked with neither success nor enthusiasm on a series of minor office jobs, he logged 522 kilometers on foot. Around this time, Nescio fell in with a circle of young men who had in common a horror of the petit bourgeois life and a personal interest in finding an alternative. Nescio was not drawn to the alluring Marxist and anarchist movements of the day; he was, however, much taken with the communal idealism of Frederik van Eeden, the renowned Dutch psychiatrist who founded a short-lived colony in

the countryside near Bussum. In 1900, Nescio applied to become a colonist but was unsuccessful; nonetheless, for a few years he and his friends remained actively intrigued by communalism and other possibilities of “getting out.” This did not, unfortunately, eliminate the need to earn a livelihood. As Nescio fictively writes:

Bekker and I had to spend most of our time at the office and do whatever those gentlemen said, and listen to their ridiculous opinions when they talked to each other, and put up with the fact that they thought they were much more clever and capable than we were. And when they thought it was cold then all the windows had to be shut and in winter the lights had to come on much too early and the curtains had to be pulled shut so we couldn't see the red sky and the twilight in the streets and we had no say in it at all.

Nescio fatefully committed himself to a business career in 1904, got married in 1906, and almost immediately began fathering one child after another. Only subsequently, and one might say consequently, was he driven to produce, in the decade beginning in 1909, his bittersweet accounts of dreaming, scheming young men and their perdition.

His first published story contains his most famous character—the freeloader, Japi, who belongs to a strange human species of incompatibles distinctive for their indisposition to activity and whose varieties might include Melville's Bartleby, Beckett's Murphy, and Walser's “divinely gifted layabout.” The freeloader exists at the edge of a group of impecunious, talkative young men with ambitions to become writers and artists and otherwise “astound” the world. (They would seem to be the exact, if less cerebral, contemporaries of the undergraduate Stephen Dedalus and his fellow collegians. James Joyce was also born in 1882.) The freeloader has no ambitions. He admits, “I'm not a poet and I'm not a nature-lover and I'm not an anarchist. I am, thank God, absolutely nothing.” He passes his time wandering around and sampling the (to him) gratis pleasures of life: the feeling of rain, a slice of cake, a beach, a glass of jenever, a fine pair of yellow shoes. Mysteriously knowledgeable, rarely disagreeable, the freeloader excites friendship and envious curiosity even as he disregards the boundaries authorized by property and propriety:

The freeloader you found lying in your bed with his dirty shoes on when you came home late; the freeloader who smoked your cigars and filled his pipe with your tobacco and burned your coal and peered into your cupboards and borrowed your money and wore out your shoes and took out your coat when he had to go home in the rain.

As Giorgio Agamben has noted, “Each of us has known such creatures ... They embody the type of eternal student or swindler who ages badly and who must be left behind in the end, even if it is against our wishes. And yet something about them, an inconclusive gesture, an unforeseen grace, a certain mathematical boldness in judgment and taste, a certain air of nimbleness in their limbs or words—all these features indicate that they belong to a complementary world and allude to a lost citizenship or an inviolable elsewhere.”

This inviolable elsewhere, for Nescio, was the Dutch countryside, to which his characters joyfully resort at every opportunity. Thus the “immortals,” as he nicknames the young protagonists of “Young Titans,” are very often to be found in the dunes, or walking the length of a dike or along the bank of a canal, or on outings to land-locked Rhenen or maritime Veere. These ramblers may be distinguished from that stroller we associate with urban noticing and longing, the flaneur, whose

unauthorized investigations suggest to us modern kinds of awareness and feeling. Although Nescio's immortals are alert metropolitan creatures, connoisseurs of the streets and girls and parks and waterways of Amsterdam, there is something residually archaic about them. When they venture out of the city, they remove themselves to a special space of aliveness. Nescionic aliveness is highly idiosyncratic. His country walkers are rarely detained by botanical or topographical or cultural details but are decidedly susceptible to impressionistic dramas of trees, waters, clouds, and sunlight. Most characteristically, the repetitive, maddeningly untransactional processes of nature—the flowing of rivers, the perpetual rising and setting of the sun—are experienced as ecstatic torments:

It was late July. The sun was still high above the ocean at seven o'clock and it made, again, I can't help it, it's God himself who keeps repeating himself, it again made a long golden stripe in the water and shone in our faces.

The intransigence of the natural world is mirrored in the intransigence of Nescio's viewpoint, which in turns reflects the intransigence of his circumstances. To recap: in his early twenties, he is pulled under, into the bourgeoisie; he writes, *de profundis*, about such pulling under; he secretively publishes a book of these underwater writings in 1918; he then succumbs fully to his bourgeois fate. Either he has no more writing in him or he must suppress that writing—suppress Nescio. In any case, Nescio can no longer be.

It's true that, after a rumor that someone else was the author of his book, Nescio's actual identity emerged; but he was able or willing only to write a few, bitty things. His life's largest undertakings remained, it seems, walking and working. He became, it has been reported, a notably demanding and severe boss, and eventually a director of the company. Then, in 1937, he retired. "I'm free," he later wrote, "after forty years I'm free, and I can cut my hair whenever I feel like it and let it grow too if I want."

Yet still Nescio did not write much, which is consistent with the notion that his impulse to write was essentially hobbyistic—which is to say, profoundly voluntary. Writing not actuated by pleasure or self-realization would have been Nescio's idea of "doing." Nescio was not a doer. As one of his narrators states, "I want to be, and for me to do is: not to be."

But over the course of a few February days in 1942, in the midst of the Occupation, Nescio did get onto paper the remarkable "Insula Dei." It is winter, and the narrator, an Amsterdam journal-keeper of sorts, records "A hostile world, a world in tatters. A world of cold and poverty." He runs into Flip, an impoverished friend, and, puffing on precious cigars, they mull over old towns, old rivers, old vistas. (Flip remarks of the Occupation, "How could someone occupy me? That has nothing to do with me. Being poor has nothing to do with me either.") The friends have further meetings. The narrator, a walker of course, discovers, while strolling, mystical inklings of contentment. The snow thaws, turns to slush.

Nescio's second book was published in 1946. Further sketches and stories appeared in 1961, the year of his death. Only posthumously did his work become so known and esteemed that it is now part of the modern Dutch canon. The work is also popular: Nescio is beloved in Holland. This is partly on account of the gentle, humorous mischief he makes, a favorite joke being his fear of scandalizing his buttoned-up Dutch reader. In "Little Poet," the hero

sees all the women sitting at the outdoor tables and walks past them to the street. "Oh God," he thinks, "what if you performed a miracle now, what if all their clothes suddenly fell off?" A

nearly mad little poet thinks the strangest things. You and I, dear reader, never think such things. And my lady readers ... Mercy me, perish the thought.

The comic note is an element of the famous Nescionic voice, which has within it wryness, lightness, simplicity, and daring vulnerability. The desire to read Nescio (especially in the marvelous Dutch, of course) is the desire to be in the presence of that voice, whatever it may be saying to us. “Us,” here, refers not only to the familiar aggregate of readers. It refers also to the single reader, because one reads Nescio in the first person plural. His voice speaks to all our selves and most keenly to those which, unless we are not human, we must keep secret.

—JOSEPH O’NEILL

THE FREELOADER

I

EXCEPT for the man who thought Sarphatistraat was the most beautiful place in Europe, I've never met anyone more peculiar than the freeloader.

The freeloader you found lying in your bed with his dirty shoes on when you came home late; the freeloader who smoked your cigars and filled his pipe with your tobacco and burned your coal and peered into your cupboards and borrowed your money and wore out your shoes and took your coat when he had to go home in the rain. The freeloader who always ordered in someone else's name, who sat and drank jenever like a prince at the outdoor tables of the Hollandais on other people's tabs, who borrowed umbrellas and never brought them back, who heated Bavink's secondhand stove until it cracked, who wore his brother's double collars and loaned out Appi's books, and took trips abroad whenever he'd hit up his old man for money again, and wore suits he never paid for.

His first name was Japi. I never knew his last name. Bavink showed up with him when he came back from Veere.

All summer long Bavink had been painting in Zeeland and it was in Veere that he saw Japi for the first time. Japi was just sitting there. Bavink wondered once or twice: Now what kind of guy is that? No one knew. He was always sitting by the water somewhere, just sitting, hour after hour, not moving. At noon and at six he went inside for an hour, to eat; the rest of the day he sat. That lasted about three weeks, then Bavink didn't see him anymore.

A couple of days later, Bavink was coming back from Rotterdam. Every now and then Bavink needed to have a lot of people around; he tromped along the Rotterdam harbor for a few days, then he'd had enough. On board the ship from Numansdorp to de Zijpe, there was Japi again, sitting. A stiff, cold wind was blowing pretty hard that morning and there were whitecaps on the water. Every now and then spray splashed up over the railing at the bow of the ship. The glass doors on the foredeck were closed; there was no one at the bow. Just Japi, peering out over the rail and getting completely drenched. "Look at that," Bavink thought, "if it isn't that same guy." He went and stood next to him. The boat pitched and rolled. Japi sat on his little bench, held on tight to his cap, and let himself get soaked. This lasted quite a while, until he noticed that someone was standing next to him. "Nice weather we're having," Bavink said. Japi looked at Bavink with his big blue eyes and kept a tight hold on his cap. Just then a big wave splashed on board. There were drops of water on Japi's face.

"It's all right," Japi said. The front of the ship crashed down onto the water with a jolt. Someone was trying to open the glass door of the salon, but the wind held it shut. "We're making good time," Bavink said, just to have something to say. "Well," Japi said. "Time doesn't mean much to me."

The conversation stalled. Japi looked at the waves. Bavink looked at Japi's gray cap and thought: Who is this guy? Suddenly Japi said, "Look, there's a rainbow in the water." There was part of the arc of a rainbow in the water, but nothing in the sky. Japi looked at Bavink again with his big blue eyes and was talkative all of a sudden.

"Damn pretty here, if you ask me," he said. "It's too bad it can't always be like this." "In an hour we'll be there," Bavink said.

"You going to Zierikzee?" Japi asked.

“Actually, I’m continuing on to Veere tonight,” Bavink said. “I see,” Japi said. “You’re staying there?”

“Yes, I’m staying there and aren’t you the gentleman from Amsterdam who always sits by the water?” Then Japi had to laugh and he said, “I do sit by the water a lot, but ‘always’ is a bit much. At night I lie in bed, I need an hour to get dressed and eat breakfast, I eat lunch for half an hour and at six I have to eat again. But I do sit by the water a lot. That’s why I go to Zeeland. I still let the pressure get to me sometimes. Last week I went to Amsterdam. I had to, I was out of money.”

“You’re from Amsterdam?” Bavink asked. “I am, thank God,” Japi said. “Me too,” Bavink said. “You don’t paint?” Bavink asked. It was a bizarre question to just ask someone, but Bavink was still trying to figure out what kind of guy this was. “No, thank God,” said Japi, “and I’m not a poet and I’m not a nature-lover and I’m not an anarchist. I am, thank God, absolutely nothing.”

That definitely appealed to Bavink.

The ship pitched, crashed, rolled, and swung from side to side; the water sprayed and poured over the rail; there was no one else to be seen on deck. Up ahead was an endless expanse of water, full of whitecaps; the shadow of a large cloud was a drifting island; far in the distance a black freighter pushed on, pitching wildly. “Look,” said Japi, “the *City of Ghent*.” You could see in the distance the water spraying up on either side of the bow; water churned and foamed and frothed around the propeller. The waves leapt with sharp crests in the hollow sea, green and blue and yellow and gray and white, depending on the depth and on the reflections of the clouds, nowhere and not for one single moment the same. A little tugboat was towing a barge and two tjalks.

“No,” Japi said, “I am nothing and I do nothing. Actually I do much too much. I’m busy overcoming the body. The best thing is to just sit still; going places and thinking are only for stupid people. I don’t think either. It’s too bad I have to eat and sleep. I’d rather spend all day and all night just sitting.”

This, Bavink started to think, was an interesting case. He nodded. Japi was holding his cap on his head with his right hand the whole time, his right arm propped up on the rail. The wind was blowing so hard that Bavink had to cover his nose with his hand to be able to breathe. Japi just sat there like he was sitting at home. Then Japi said that his plan was to stay in Veere for another few weeks, until his cash ran out.

Painting seemed nice enough to him, if you could do it. He couldn’t do anything, so he didn’t do anything. And after all, you can’t express things the way you feel them. He had just one wish: to overcome the body, to no longer feel hunger or exhaustion, cold or rain. Those were the great enemies. You always had to eat and sleep, over and over again, you had to get out of the cold, you got wet and tired or miserable. Now look at that water. It has it good: it just ripples and reflects the clouds, it’s always changing and yet always stays the same too. Has no problems at all.

All this time Bavink stood bracing himself with his walking stick, leaning into the wind, and nodding at Japi. He’s onto something there, Bavink thought. And he drily asked if Japi was also going on to Veere. So the conversation turned to Zierikzee, Middelburg, Arnemuiden, and all the places where they had both done plenty of walking and standing and sitting around. For Japi had in fact done quite a bit more in his life than just sit by the water in Veere. And Bavink realized before long that Japi could not only walk and stand and sit, he could see too. And talk about it for hours. And when they stepped onto land again at de Zijpe, Japi pointed southwest, at the wide tower of Zierikzee, dimly visible on the horizon, and said, “Fat Jan, patient old Fat Jan, he’s still standing. I thought so. Sure, he’s still standing.” And then Bavink asked if Japi was always in such a good mood and then Japi said “I am,” nothing more. And when they got to Zierikzee and stepped off the streetcar Japi

flapped the soles of his shoes on the hot cobblestones of some unshaded little street that was just baking in the sun, and stretched, and said that life really was devilishly funny. And then he shook his walking stick threateningly at the sun and said, "Still, this sun! It shines but then it starts to go down, it doesn't go back up again, when it's after noon it has to set. It'll be cool again tonight. Everyone's eyes would pop out of their heads if it didn't go down one day. Nice and warm, huh? My things are sticking to my body. The sea air is steaming out of my collar."

So clearly this "overcoming the body" stuff wasn't meant quite as literally as all that.

At the table, Japi was more than talkative. He talked enough for three, and ate enough for six. "The sea air digs a hole in you," they say in Veere. He drank enough for six more and sang the whole shanty of the *Nancy Brick*. In short, he was bustling and boisterous and Bavink thought a guy like this is worth his weight in gold.

That he was. In the afternoon he took Bavink to the canal ring and walked him three times around Zierikzee. His mouth never stopped moving and his walking stick kept pointing and when the Zierikzeers stopped and stared he walked up to them and called them "young man" and asked after their health and clapped them on the shoulder. Bavink doubled over from laughing so hard. Japi was good at getting even with those well-disposed cultured Dutchmen who have no patience for anyone who doesn't look at least as stupid and tasteless as they do, and who scoff at you and say things about you to your face, in public, as though pastors and priests in even the tiniest villages hadn't been trying to raise people properly for centuries. Japi was a workhorse and he could lay into people, if needed, with such skill and force that even the most brutish lout had to knuckle under. Things didn't go that far in Zierikzee. People in Zee-land are actually pretty nice. Japi liked to say, "The one thing I'm sorry about is that there isn't a brawl in Walcheren every now and then."

II

For two days Bavink and Japi tromped around Veere and already they were thick as thieves. They sat together for hours on the roof of the Hospitaal and looked out over Walcheren and de Kreek and Veergat and the mouth of the Oosterschelde and the dunes on Schouwen. There was Fat Jan again, the Zierikzee tower, now to the north. And there was Goes, and Tall Jan, the Middelburg tower, the spire around which Walcheren turned, the heart of this world. And the tide came in and the tide went out; the water rose and fell. Every night the limping harbormaster came and first he lit the green light on Noorderhoofd, the breakwater, then he came back down and then he had to go around the whole harbor and then you saw him by the tower again and then he opened the wooden gate and climbed the wooden steps and lit the light in that tower too. And then Japi said "Another day, boss," and the limping harbormaster said "Yes, sir, another day." And then when you looked toward Schouwen, you saw the light blinking on and off as it turned. And an hour out to sea the buoy floated and its light shone and went out, shone and went out. And the water sloshed up and down and all through the night the sun that you couldn't see slid past in the north and the last light of day that you could see slid past in the north along with it and turned into the first light of the new morning. One day touched the next, the way they always do in June.

For the earth everything was simple enough. It just turned on its axis and followed its course around the sun and had nothing to worry about. But the people on it fretted out their days with troubles and cares and endless worries, as though without these troubles, these cares, and these worries, the day wouldn't turn into night.

Japi knew better. The sun went down into the ocean by the Walcheren dunes on its own. But Bavink was in a bad way sometimes.

Bavink was someone who usually worked hard. People thought he was pretty good. He had a good laugh about that. He didn't sell anything when he didn't have to; he put aside his best work and never looked at it again, always dissatisfied. As long as he was working everything went fine, as soon as he stopped he suffered; sometimes he was half dead with fatigue. If people knew how he really saw things, how things gripped him, they would laugh at his bungling, his dismally botched attempts to reproduce that majesty. There were times when Bavink did nothing, just let himself go, neglected everything, looked lazily at everything and thought it was "nice" that things were "so damn beautiful," as he put it. Times when he felt a pain in his skull thinking about all his futile efforts, his "admirable work." Admirable work! It made him want to throw up just thinking about it. "Admirable work," they said. They didn't know the first thing about it. God obviously hadn't kicked them around like Bavink.

He wished he could just give up painting, but that wasn't so simple either: what's inside you wants to come out. And so the torture started up again: work, work, work day and night, paint all day and fret all night, stay with it, work through it, worry about whether you've really got hold of the things this time. He didn't sleep or eat much; at the beginning he would smoke an enormous number of cigars, one after the other, but after the first day he stopped doing that too. He had moments of the greatest bliss, a joy that all his languid submersion in that "delicious beauty" couldn't give him. And then they came to look, this person, that person, they stood behind him in twos and threes and fours and they looked and nodded and pointed. And suddenly it was over. Then he said "Dammit" and went and lay down on his cot and sent someone out for a flask of jenever and he was done. After a few days he put the canvas away with the rest. In the days that followed he was wretched, tired, miserable, numb, and sick, and he started "shuffling around" again, as he put it: doing nothing, loafing, walking around. If he needed money he dragged something out of his "garbage heap," looked for a "scrap" that "somebody would give something for," and sold it. Nobody could change his ways—that's just how he was. His strengths and weaknesses were one. When he sold something, he stuffed the money into his pocket and clinked with guilders and rijksdollars and walked down Kalverstraat whistling a tune. He said a friendly hello and waved happily whenever you ran into him.

Then he came up and stood next to you and slyly showed you all the "coppers" in his pocket, and laughed out loud, and said, "Can you believe those suckers?" He never accepted paper money: you can't clink bills in your pocket. He had to have gold and silver, and when it was too much for him to carry he said he'd "come by to get the rest later."

That was Bavink. Clearly someone in a constant state of overcoming the body would be thoroughly interesting to him. He could learn something from a man like that. Someone who thought it was fine just to let the wind blow through his hair, let the cold, wet wind soak his clothes and his body, who ran his tongue over his lips because the taste of the ocean was so "goddamn delicious," who sniffed his hands at night to smell the sea. Someone who thought it was enough to be alive and in good health, who went on his joyful way between God's heaven and God's earth and thought it was idiotic that people caused themselves so much trouble, and laughed out loud at them, and sat there eternally with his beatific smile, quietly enjoying the water and the sky and the clouds and the fields, and let the rain soak him through without noticing it and then said "I think I'm wet" and laughed. Someone who could eat an expensive meal and drink expensive jenever better than anyone in Holland and then, at other times, on his long walks (because he didn't always sit around, every so often he spent days at a time on his feet), he'd eat dry rolls day in and day out and be moved to tears because

out in the open “a piece of bread like this can taste so good.”

And when Bavink was working, Japi sat nearby on the grass or back-to-front on a chair inside, smoking. When they were both inside, Japi kept another chair nearby with a little glass of liquor on it, and reached out his hand for it every now and then. And he kept Bavink on track. Bavink had never spoken a word to anyone when he was working but he talked with Japi.

“The hell with it,” Japi said, “what does it matter if it’s good or not! You do what you can, you’re just a poor bastard like everyone else. You have to paint. You can’t stop, can you? The things don’t care if you don’t get them down exactly how you see them. And other people don’t understand anything anyway, not the things and not your work and not you. As for me, I could spend my time in a lot more interesting ways than sitting here boozing and eyeballing that mess of paint. You think *I’d* be any worse off?

“No, that’s all wrong,” he said then, “much too blue—don’t you remember what we talked about yesterday? Much too blue. Please. You think it would have grabbed you the way it did if it was that weird blue color?”

Japi was worth his weight in gold to Bavink. Bavink brought him along everywhere. It was Bavink who made Japi what he was when Bavink turned up with him in Amsterdam.

In no time Japi was worse than low on funds. Bavink wouldn’t let him go for all the money in the world. Japi’s only job was to look through the “garbage heap,” and he got the hang of it in no time—never before had “the dump” turned such a profit. Since then, Bavink paid for everything, or almost everything. Now and then Japi got a little money from home. But that didn’t make any difference since sometimes they lived it up like tycoons—when they were in the mood they went to Amsterdam for a few days, to Brussels, Paris, Luxembourg, they spent two weeks in Normandy. Japi usually brought along a few things from the scrap heap, “a chip off the old scrap heap” he called it. In France and Belgium he went up to people on the street, rang doorbells. There was no one else in the world Bavink would have let do any of this. But no one else understood the art of keeping Bavink alive, as Bavink said. His conversation was inexhaustible. And he had a memory for landscapes that bordered on the miraculous. He knew everything along the railroad line from Middelburg to Amsterdam: every field, every ditch, every house, every road, every stand of trees, every patch of heather in Brabant, every switch in the tracks. If you had been traveling for hours in the dark and Japi was stretched out asleep on the seats the whole time and you woke him up and asked “Japi, where are we?” you would just have to wait until he fully woke up and all he had to do was listen to the sound of the train on the tracks and then he’d say, “I think we’re in Etten-Leur.” And he’d be right. He could tell you precisely how, on such-and-such a day, the shadow of such-and-such a tree in Zaltbommel fell on such-and-such a road, and which ships were sailing down Kuilenburg into the Lek at the moment when you and Japi were crossing a given railroad bridge. And then he’d sit attentively at the window: “Now this is coming, now that is coming.” For hours. And he’d nod and laugh whenever he saw something he knew especially well. Or else he would say, “Look, the tree is gone,” or “Hey, there are new apples on it now, I didn’t see any last time.” Or: “Two weeks ago the sun was right behind the crown of that tree, now it’s a little to the left, and lower, it’s because we’ve gone two more weeks, and we’re also running ten minutes late.”

III

And so when winter came to Amsterdam they came too, and Japi sat in my room one night and

smoked the cigars sitting on my table for the taking, one after another. *My* cigars.

That was the night Hoyer was over. He had just drifted back from Paris again and now he sat there, tall and lanky, wearing a straw hat, in November, and a salmon-colored jacket, and griping about his work, and about girls. He was in the middle of an incomprehensible story about a young lady and a hired coachman and a basket of eels when we heard the stomp of footsteps coming up the stairs. It was in a working-class neighborhood so you could usually just come on up, most of the front doors were left open.

Bavink came in first and said, "How's it going, boys? It's me. Ha, if it isn't Hoyer! How are you, Hoyer? Still griping? Well heartiest greetings to you. To you too, Koekebakker, may you long be with us." Japi stood in the door. They smelled of salt water and grass. "Come in, man, come in!" Bavink invited him in—into *my* apartment.

"For Chrissake," Hoyer said, "would you please be so kind as to shut the door?" "Koekebakker," Bavink said, "this is Japi, a guy who knows how to have a good time. Hoyer's polite as ever, I see. Have a seat, Japi," Bavink said, flopping down into the one free chair, "just pull up that trunk." A gallows-colored sea chest was sitting there, which contained one clean shirt and my sister's letters. "Wait, I'll help," I said. Then we slid the trunk over to the table, Japi and I, and then Japi saw an empty crate of Hoffmann's starch with a picture of a cat on it. I had put soil in it but nothing would grow. "How about that instead," Japi said, "otherwise I'm so low." "I'll take one of these," Bavink said, lighting up one of my cigars. "You too, Japi?" That suited Japi just fine. "What's that you've got there?" Bavink said. *Le Lys dans la vallée* by Balzac was lying on the table. "Ah, good old Balzac. He's no young whippersnapper. Dead, right? Dead a long time. Of course. Where'd you blow in from, Hoyer? What a beautiful coat you have on. Stand up. Too short, man, much too short." Bavink was in an expansive mood. "Geez, I know," Hoyer said. "Why don't you tell us where you've been hiding out, and who's this gentleman?"

Then came the story, accompanied by nods and grins from Japi. And now and then his hand would reach out toward my table, and Hoyer was smoking like a chimney too, I had stopped smoking. "Wait a minute," Bavink said. "Here, I have some special cigars. Kamper Middelburgs, from Bessem & Hoogenkamp by Lange Delft." "I know them," I said.

"My boy," Japi said, taking a look around my attic room, "it looks cozy here. By God, it's cozy here." He stood up and walked over to the wall. "Ah, Breitner. Very good. And what have we here? It's a bit dark in here. So, good old Anton Mauve. And there we have the city hall, by God." It was a sketch of the Veere city hall. "Bavink," Japi said, "I do believe you're familiar with this. I'll go look for a job *right now* if that isn't a little something of yours."

"You're in luck," Bavink said. "I thought so," Japi said, and he sat back down. "No, really, I'll definitely be coming back here again. I like it here."

Just then the gramophone belonging to the diamond cutter across the street started up. "Clap," Japi said. And we clapped. The four of us stood at the open window and applauded our hearts out. You could hear porch doors opening everywhere, people came outside, some applauded with us, a child started crying, a dog howled as though the whole block would be dead within a month. The diamond cutter never flinched—he was magnificent. A young woman across the street shouted, "Buncha idiots!" A little girl shrieked a few times: "It's Papus! It's Zeppelin!" A kid started playing his harmonica. "It's about time we left," Hoyer said.

So we stomped downstairs. On the fourth and third floors there were loud discussions going on inside. "About us," Japi said. On the second floor there was no one home. "Say, Japi," Bavink said on the street, "you need to get this round." "Sure," Japi said, "let's go." So I got to see what Japi was

like that same night. Hoyer's theory was that beer never did any harm, so we drank a very respectable amount of it. Japi didn't have a penny. Hoyer flat-out refused, Bavink was drunk and staring vacantly into space and insisting that "This guy is a damn good fellow and he's getting this round"—he meant Japi—"and the waiter is a damn good fellow too." I had nineteen cents; Hoyer slipped out. I decided to put "the situation" on my tab, the waiter knew me, and at one o'clock the three of us were crossing Frederiksplein, yodeling happily. I got the money back from Bavink later; he absolutely insisted I take it. Japi found it all splendid and three days later he was sitting on the edge of my bed, swinging his legs back and forth; he said it was stupid of Bavink to get so plastered, but "everything worked out." When he left, he had *Le Lys dans la vallée* in his hand.

IV

It was a month later. It had been below freezing for a fortnight but at the beginning of the week there was a sudden change. And now it was night, and raining heavily. All day long it had been raining hard, almost without a break. The water ran in streams down my window-pane. It felt cozy inside. I liked it. I had no stove and my summer coat was still at the pawnshop. I had never owned a winter coat. The frost was a problem; you had to stay in bed out of poverty, it was the only way to keep warm. Usually in these circumstances I would just drop by Bavink's. But just then the man had taken to sleeping all day and walking around all night. I had sat by his stove all night, alone and abandoned—he would have wanted me to but it wasn't exactly fun. And now I sat listening to the rain clatter on the roof and was glad it was thawing, thawing hard. My bread, two thick slices, was directly on the tabletop; my last plate had gotten broken the previous night. Next to the bread was my cash: four blue bills, two rijksdollar coins, three guilders, and a few cents. And my kerosene burner stood on the floor in the corner, the water was starting to bubble in the little kettle on it. Next to it was my teapot, lid off, ready for the water to boil; there was already tea inside. And I sat with my legs stretched out under the table, barefoot, in a shirt, my hands in my pants pockets, and I looked at my food, at my wonderful money, at the flame of my oil lamp, at the single light of my little burner, and I listened to the rain and I was happy.

It was eight o'clock. I put my watch down on the table next to my money, the watch that was no longer on its way to the pawnshop, and I said, "For now you'll stay right here with Old Man Koekebakker, little watch," and I put my hand back in my pocket. I was used to having conversations with my things since there's so little that's worth saying to most people.

I was out of the woods for now—dear Autumn hadn't let me down. The falling leaves, the southwest wind bending the trees on Veerschenweg even farther to the northeast and blowing snatches of Tall Jan's bells to my ears and making the towers sway and shake in fear beneath the black clouds—I had finally transmuted it to gold at my writing desk and now I could sit and look at it in the form of my own money, money you can count on and that never lets you down and never leaves you in the lurch. I had gotten home an hour before, soaked to the skin, with a loaf of bread, a half pound of butter, six ounces of sausage, a half pound of sugar, three ounces of tea, and a box of cigars, twenty-five for four cents—riches I hadn't known since my birthday, and that was months ago. I had already put away the sausage, that was for tomorrow. I had had a little cupboard built next to the window, and that's where I put everything all in a row on the bottom shelf: butter, tea, sugar, sausage, all the things that can taste so good when you haven't had them for a long time. And the rest of the loaf of bread, minus the two slices, was up on a higher shelf.

My clothes were hanging up to dry at the top of the stairs, under the rafters: jacket, sweater, pants, underpants, shirt, and socks. The water started to boil, the lid of the kettle rattled up and down. I looked at the steam and started thinking about how I would get my coat from the pawnshop tomorrow and for once not eat dinner in the kosher restaurant—beef and potatoes for thirty cents, pea soup with meat for thirty-five cents. And I was just thinking that it wouldn't be unreasonable to think about getting a little something to drink in the house when my meditations were interrupted by a heavy footstep outside the door. Someone was fumbling with my door. You couldn't knock because the door was made of wallpaper glued to a couple of screens, if you knocked you would put your hand right through it. People knew that. "It must be Hoyer," I thought, "he can never find the hook." The hook was on the inside but the door never closed properly and you could just get your finger through the crack and open the door from the outside. "Come in," I shouted, too lazy to get up. "Easier said than done," I heard a voice say, "how does it work?" "I don't recognize that voice," I thought, "who can it be?" I stood up and opened the door, and a trickle of water ran over my hand. "It's Japi," the man said. "Come in," I said again. There he stood, water streaming from every fold of his clothes and off his hat too.

"Sure is raining," Japi said. "Can I put my jacket somewhere? Wait a minute, have to put this down first." He took a package wrapped in newspaper out from under his jacket—books, you could tell—and put it on the table. "So, is there somewhere to hang this?" he said, handing me his jacket. He leaned his hat against my little cooking stove.

"One minute, old man," I said, and I took his jacket and hat out to the common area, hung the jacket next to my own wet clothes, and shook out the hat and put it on the floor in the corner.

Japi was already seated, squeezing out his pants legs and looking around. "To what do I owe the pleasure, sir?" "Just call me Japi," he said. He unwrapped the package and put *Le Lys dans la vallée* down on the table. "There you go, friend." "Thanks," I said, "and what are those?" "Oh," Japi said, "some of Appi's books." "Is Appi reading the *Handelsblad* these days?" "No," Japi said, "the paper is from my old man. There's a want ad in there." "A want ad?" "A want ad, look, I just got it from the old man."

"'Seeking assistant clerk for a busy export business'—got that? a *busy* export business—'thorough knowledge of modern languages, steno, typing. Applicants with prior experience in export'—hear that? *prior* experience!—'will enjoy preferential consideration.' *Enjoy* preferential consideration, I like that one. 'Salary: 300–400/yr. Apply at #1296, Handelsblad ofc.' It's like Floris the Fifth. Floris the Stiff more like it. Floris the Stiff jumps over the Overtoom. Never heard that? Why do you think they filled in the Overtoom canal? They got tired of seeing that stiff guy jumping over it all the time. The 300–400 a year sounds nice to me, the rest not so much."

"You think you'll answer the ad?" I asked. "Think?" Japi said. "I *have* to, according to the old man. He says it can't go on like this. I don't see why not. Am I a burden on him? I've slept at home only twice this month, he doesn't give me a cent. Look at this." He stuck out a leg. I saw a brand-new yellow shoe. "What the devil, I know those shoes."—Where had I seen yellow shoes like that?—"They're a bit darker now because of the water," Japi said, and he stuck out his other foot next to the first. "From Appi! And why? Because *I'm* not a burden on my old man, *I* go around in my old shoes till they have more holes than a sieve. Appi's a good guy. Can't paint, and never will, that's for sure, but you can count on him. He didn't have any socks on hand, I'm barefoot in these shoes," Japi said, and good-naturedly pulled up a pants leg to show me his naked leg. "And he has books. I couldn't get through all those books if I read night and day for a year."

Appi's father had a butcher shop that was doing well, he could afford it. And Japi was right when

he saw that Appi would never learn how to paint. His father would later get him a job painting houses, signs, and billboards.

I made tea. Squatting next to the burner, I poured the water into the teapot and put it on top of the kettle. Japi sniffed.

“Smells good,” he said, and turned all the way around, scooting his chair over so he could sit with his nose right above the teapot. “I had a fight with Bavink,” he said. “Really?” I said. I had heard from Hoyer that they were roaming around everywhere together, day and night, that they slept in the same bed—Japi under the covers and Bavink on top—and took turns drinking jenever out of the one beer glass Bavink had left. “I busted his stove Sunday night.”

In one night he had heated it so hot that it broke. And still he kept piling more coal in and poking it around and kept looking at the belly and smoking his pipe, with the stove between his knees so to speak. And he didn’t say anything, until Bavink suddenly saw that there was a huge crack in the belly and raised hell. Japi let him thunder on, he stood up and moved his chair away, Bavink opened the grate with the poker and burned a hole in the floor with the glowing coals he dragged out. And when Bavink was still raging, Japi said “You and your stove” and coolly left and went back to his old man’s house and put on one of his brother’s clean collars and got a piece of pie from his mother that was left over from dessert. He spent one night at home and the next afternoon he ran into Loef on the street, he’d already met him too. Loef, who later drowned swimming, just when he was starting to make something of himself—he took Japi back to Bavink and said, “Here Bavink, I have a stove-buster for you.” And Bavink had laughed. And Japi went straight to the shelf and found a new bottle of Bols in the usual place, “next to Dante.” And the three of them knocked back most of the bottle and then Japi cut thick slices of Bavink’s bread to make sandwiches and then all three of them were off to Amstelveld and they bought a new stove for seventy cents (it was Monday), a prehistoric model, and they got it home in a wheelbarrow, the three of them.

I handed Japi a cup of tea. He drank it out of a mixing bowl, I didn’t have a cup for him. He groaned in contentment and banged the bowl down on the table. “What I could really use now is some bread,” he said. “Don’t mind me, I think I can find it.” He’d had his eye on my cupboard for a while. “Hey,” he said, “did you know you have meat in the house?” Did I know! He was already putting some sausage on the bread. “Sausage on bread—the people’s victuals.” My sausage, my treasure, the object of my reveries of luxury: the ham I was saving for tomorrow. Of course Japi went straight for that. I have to admit that he didn’t forget about me—he gave me two slices of sausage on every slice of bread. There was enough for that. And Japi ate. How he could eat! The bread was there next to him on the table and he just sliced away. I started to enjoy it. “Don’t be shy, Japi, there’s enough money.” Japi hadn’t noticed the money yet. “Damn!” he said. “It’s a pot of gold! They must have printed another one of your pieces.” I nodded. “As well they should,” he said. “What else are those people good for besides paying our expenses, I’d like to know. I’ve also written a thing or two in my day.” He stuffed his mouth full of bread and sausage and wiped his hands on the newspaper before crumpling it up. “I shouldn’t be writing anything, though, it’s not like I’m any good.”

Then out from his inner pocket came an old, moldering, nasty-smelling newspaper with the creases worn through. It was *The Vlagtwedde Sentinel* and he showed me an article with “Letters from Amsterdam” at the top. He’d written six, he said, but his brother had lost the other five. Japi helped himself to another slice of bread. “You don’t want any more?” he asked. I declined and Japi took the last quarter pound of my sausage. “The people’s victuals” seemed to agree with him. “Did it at night,” Japi said with his mouth full, pointing to the paper with his knife. “After hours. I always had to go back to the office in the evening. Sometimes I had to hold my head under the faucet to stay

awake. Now I'd say no thank you. What do I care? Nothing. It only tires you out. I'd rather just walk around and look at people and the carriages and the houses. And especially at the pretty girls and the fresh-faced brides. You can always pick out women who have just gotten married, you can tell right away. And then I think about the fun I don't have with all those dear creatures. I'd rather do that than write about it. What do the numskulls care what I see. They just shuffle down their own streets, staring down at the ground with tedious faces stuck to their heads because it's a lost cause, life is so hard, it makes them miserable. What have they ever done for me? Let 'em keep their couple dollars."

The article was quite well done, but Hoyer said later that he was sure Japi didn't write it.

"Now I could really go for a pint of beer," Japi said, leaning back. "Sorry, man," I said, "none in the house, no beer and no jenever and no clothes to go across the street in, but have a cigar."

The rain clattered on the roof like it was about to break through and the windows were white with water. Japi was not in the mood to go outside, I was sure of that. He lit a cigar, looked at the smoke for a while, then said, "That Hoyer, what kind of a guy is he really?" Hoyer and Japi didn't get along. I'd already realized that. Hoyer was a penny-pincher and spoke his mind too. "He's useless," Japi said, "he should stick to smearing his paints around, he's no good for anything else."

Bavink had left town for the day, "on business" Japi said, and he (Japi) had run into van Houten on the way home from the office. Van Houten, a friend of Bavink's, worked in an office and thought he could write. He had already published a brick of a novel, which had cost the publisher a pretty penny. Japi let himself be invited out to dinner. Hoyer was there too, he was the first one to say, "Hey, freeloader!" Japi thought that was excellent. After all, who among us is not a freeloader? "The bourgeoisie are there to pay our expenses." That same night he had asked Hoyer to loan him a rijksdollar, just to needle him. He knew perfectly well that Hoyer wouldn't happen to have any money on him at the moment. But even big ol' Hoyer got taken eventually, he couldn't help it. Japi borrowed Hoyer's ridiculous salmon-colored coat and never brought it back. Japi didn't get much enjoyment out of it, though. He was always getting into fights about it, and eventually some roughnecks tore a sleeve off, on the bridge in Ouderkerk.

"Look at that," Japi said, "quarter past nine. Time to get going. Listen to that rain." He went and stood by the window. "Pitch black," he said. "Can't see anything through this rain. Phew, I'm shivering, my pants legs are still wet. Too bad you don't have anything to drink in the house." I fetched his jacket. It was still water-logged.

"Do you have a long way to go in this weather?" I asked. "I could go by the old man's," Japi said, "but that's half an hour away too. That's your nest, is it?" Japi shoved the curtain aside and sat down on my bed and yawned. "I think I'm coming down with something," he said. "You know what you should do, go get a half dram of old jen-ever, it's on me. I'll pay you back when I get the chance." I was still standing there with his jacket over my arm. "Wear my jacket," he said. I stumbled out to the attic—my sweater was more or less dry. The liquor store wasn't far. I draped Japi's wet jacket over my sweater. The thing felt cold and unpleasant. And I went down the stairs like that and across the street. There was no line and I was back within ten minutes. When I came upstairs I found Japi lying there snoring, in his clothes, with his shoes on. "Hello!" I shouted and shook him by the shoulder. He mumbled something. "Hello, jenever's here." He looked drowsily up at me and sat up slowly. "Oh," he said, "so I see." He drank a sip. "That'll fix me right up. Say," he said, "can't I spend the night here? I didn't get a wink of sleep last night or today either." What was I supposed to say? He could sleep on the floor, he said, if he could just have something to put under his head. "Thank God," he said, throwing both his shoes across the room at the same time, "Thank God I'm out of those dripping wet monsters!" Then he hung his pants over the back of a chair, "to dry out." He pushed my little

burner aside, put Appi's books down in the corner, put his jacket on top, and kept his sweater on. Then he took my best blanket, rolled himself up in it, took another sip of jenever, and lay down with his head on the little pile and said, "Sleep tight."

And I went back to the table and sat down, looked at my money, and dozed off. When I woke up the lamp was out of oil and sputtering. I crept into my bed and slept badly because of the cold. Japi didn't notice a thing.

When day broke and I woke up, for the umpteenth time, I heard him rummaging around. He was busy making tea, had gone downstairs on his own to get water and told my startled neighbor that he was a cousin of mine. He had slept great, was just a bit stiff. He hoped he hadn't woken me up. "I already ate," he said. "I think you're pretty much out of bread." He had to go. He wanted to talk to Bavink who in those days usually went to sleep around ten in the morning. He brought me a mixing bowl of tea in bed and stood by the window slurping his own bowl. He held it tight in both hands and looked out. "Times are tough all over," he said. "Well then, ciao, I can get my jacket from the clothesline myself." At the door he turned around again. "A place like this looks a lot nicer at night."

I thought so too. I stumbled out of bed, cold and miserable. My money was still lying on the table. He had said he didn't need his old man's money, I thought, or the bourgeoisie's money either. *You* try saying that.

V

"Koekebakker," Japi said, "I feel so strange inside." It was one afternoon at Bavink's. I'd stopped by to talk to Bavink but he was out. Japi was sitting at the table with a little dime bottle of ink and a pile of newspapers in front of him. "Koekebakker, I feel so strange inside."

"Well you certainly smell like jenever," I said.

"No," Japi said, "it's not the jenever. I think my soul is too big." Can you believe it? That sponger! "What are the newspapers for, Japi?" I asked. Japi slapped the pile. "*Daily News*, Koekebakker, *Daily News*. Some of them are a month old." "Have to apply for a job again, Japi?" "You guessed it. Can't go on like this. Grab a chair. Look: KH14684, *Daily News*. Dear Sirs:"—"How many have you done so far?" I asked.—"First one. It's slow going. You people who've never worked in an office, you don't know what it's like. What'll you have to drink, man? You don't mind if I keep going, do you?" and he dipped his pen in the ink and then stared at the blank page. "Koekebakker," Japi said, looking helplessly around and putting down his pen. "It's no good. I'm not the man for this. I worked in an office once, and I'm not cut out for it. I know from experience. I don't understand anything about it. What's the point of it all? I'm perfectly satisfied as I am. Let's just put that all away." And he picked up the stack of newspapers and carefully placed them out of sight beneath the table.

"There, now I can't see them. You don't know what an office job is like, Koekebakker, or you wouldn't laugh. First you go to school till you're eighteen. Do you know how many sheep there are in Australia or how deep the Suez Canal is? My point exactly. But *I* knew all that. Do you know what polarization is? Me neither, but I *used* to. I had to learn the strangest things: 'Credited to the inventory account,' translate that into French. Have a go at that. You have no idea, Koekebakker. And it goes on for years. Then your old man sticks you in an office. And you realize that the reason you learned all those things was so that you could wet slips of paper with a little brush. And it's always the same old routine, be there nine o'clock sharp, sit there quietly for hours and hours. I realized I couldn't do it. I

was always late, I really tried to get there on time but it never happened, it had been going on too long. And so boring. They said I did everything wrong and I'm sure they were right about that. I wanted to but I couldn't do it, I'm not the kind of person who is cut out for work. Then they said I was distracting the others. They were probably right about that too. When I complained that this was boring the hell out of me and asked if this was why I had learned all those strange facts at school, the old accountant said, 'Yes, my boy, life's no novel.' I could tell a good joke, and they liked that, but it wasn't enough for them. It didn't take long before the old accountant had no idea what to do with me. When the boss wasn't there I made animal noises or sang funny songs they'd never heard before. The boss's son was a stuck-up little brat who came by the office now and then to get some money. Everything he said was horribly pretentious and he looked down on daddy's employees with an absolutely insufferable, totally unfounded air of superiority. The guys laughed their heads off when I imitated the young gentleman. I ruined a typewriter there too, and misplaced a book. Then they sat me down at a machine they called 'the guillotine.' I had to cut samples. For days and days I sat there and guillotined. All the samples I cut were crooked. They must have known that that was going to happen, what else would they expect? They'd only put me there to prevent anything worse. They threw out the samples—the clients never saw them. But I'd still managed to put a letter in the wrong envelope somehow. It was pretty bad, of course: the man who got the letter wasn't supposed to know that the boss was doing business with the man the letter was written to. The accountant practically had a stroke. That's when I figured it would be better if I left. The boss held out his hand, and I was glad to be on my way too, I shook it heartily up and down. I said I was sorry but that there was nothing I could do about it. I think I meant it too. See, Koekebakker, that's an office job. After that I interned in a stockbroker's office once, looking through newspapers with a book to see if any of the clients' bonds had been selected for redemption. Wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. They had to get rid of me. I had to copy there too, but I don't think they could ever figure out what I'd copied. I could see it wasn't working out, I couldn't stay focused.

"My old man was at his wit's end. Now he's hoping that things have improved with time. I'm not so sure. Doesn't look that way to me. I'm doing just fine. Did you know Bavink just made a pile of money with his latest painting? *Ditch at Kortenhoef*, with calf and haystack. Look at this." He took out his wallet. "It's bulging with cash, Koekebakker my boy, just bulging with cash. Cold hard cash. I'm going on a trip tomorrow."

"With Bavink?" I asked. "No," Japi said, "not with Bavink. Alone. I'm going to Friesland." "In the middle of winter?" Japi nodded. "To do what?" He shrugged his shoulders. "Do? Nothing. All you people are so pathetically sensible: everything needs a reason and a purpose. I'm going to Friesland, not to do anything, not for anything. No reason. Because I feel like it."

The next day I took him to the station to catch the 7 p.m. express. It was already dark. He was wearing a jacket with the buttons missing, much too big for him, and a hat with a brim that flopped down over his ears, and Appi's new yellow shoes on his feet. In his hand was a paper cigar holder with an advertisement on it. "Wait a second," he said, when we were already downstairs. "I forgot something." He came right back down carrying a fishing pole.

He wasn't very talkative that evening. I couldn't get out of him what he was planning to do with the fishing pole. On the way to the station, he smoked four cigars in half an hour with his paper cigar holder, and when I said goodbye to him at the gate he asked if I happened to have a little tobacco for him.

Six weeks later he came back with six buttons on his jacket and a pair of red velvet slippers on his feet. He refused to give any explanations. Where was his fishing pole? Oh, that, he'd dropped it

out of the train. One time he'd fallen in the water himself too, he said. Other than that his lips were sealed. He had obviously not had a shave the whole time, he looked the color of red brick and smelled like cow shit. He brought back two pounds of tobacco that no one else could smoke, he was addicted to it and didn't ask for a cigar for two weeks. Then the two pounds were gone, plus a butt he had brought too. It turned out you couldn't get that kind of tobacco anywhere in Amsterdam. He wrote to Friesland for some more but didn't get an answer. He was inconsolable. After a few days, though, I saw him sitting at Bavink's again with a cigar in his mouth after all, one of Bavink's of course.

VI

The next summer, Japi disappeared again. Then I ran into him on Boulevard du Nord in Brussels. Monsieur Japi was clean-shaven and nattily dressed in a gray hat, a narrow gold-colored silk tie, checkered shirt, belt, white flannel jacket with thin blue pinstripes, white linen pants with impeccable cuffs, brown and white argyle socks, and flat shoes.

How was it going? Dandy. What was he doing here? Strolling back and forth along the boulevards between Gare du Nord and Gare du Midi. Having a good time? Splendid. Residing? In Uccle. Freeloading upon? He laughed but didn't answer. We had several glasses of strong beer at the Maastricht pub on Place de Brouckère. He loved the beer there. Actually he drank several pints and I had one pint I didn't finish. He sat majestically straight in his chair and drank with dignity and great pleasure, held forth on the topics of asphalt, the Grote Markt, and the fine weather, then said he had to go and asked where I was staying. In that case he'd have to come pay me a visit sometime. After saying that, he paid for the beers and left me sitting there in amazement.

He came back to Amsterdam at the beginning of August with a bandaged head. A mine worker in Marchienne-au-Pont had smashed a ceramic pot over his head. He looked more down-and-out than ever. His old man was keeping him on a terribly short leash. He wore his white pants, which hadn't been white for a long time, deep into November. He was not his old self anymore—he talked less, smoked much less. When he came by Bavink's place and Bavink put his cigars on the table, he collapsed into a chair, kept his jacket and hat on, picked up a cigar with difficulty, slowly bit the end off, had trouble finding his matches, hesitated before lighting it, smoked it slowly, and rarely had more than one a night. If he did light a second cigar he would throw most of it away, something he never used to do before. He used to smoke a cigar until the end was too small to hold and then stick a pin in it to smoke the rest. Before long it was burning crooked. One time he let Bavink's stove go out.

We gave up on him.

Then, on a night with a hard frost, between Christmas and New Year's, Hoyer appeared, after we hadn't seen him in months. We chatted about this and that for a while and then he asked about Japi. And started to reminisce. Did we remember how last summer (about six months back at that point) he went rowing with us on the Amstel at night—he was supposed to sit in the bow and keep a lookout because the *Perseverance* was smashing little boats to pieces at the time, it had just sunk a tjalk at the Omval. Japi sat and looked at the reflection of the stars in the water, and held his right hand in the water, and didn't notice any *Perseverance*, so that the *Perseverance* practically had to run aground in the bend to avoid us. They were furious and one of them ran back to the aft deck and chewed us out for being stark raving morons, and threw a stone that plunged into the water in front of our bow. Then Bavink had said he knew something like this would happen and Japi said: "Close one."

"Apropos of which," Hoyer suddenly said—Hoyer liked to throw around fancy phrases

—“Apropos of which, I saw Japi in Veere with a French lady, a damned fine looker.” All night long the two of them had stood talking together on the stone jetty and looking out over the railing at the lit buoy and the revolving beam of the Schouwen lighthouse, and they’d listened to the waves, and “sucked face,” as Hoyer crudely put it. Bavink said again that he always knew something like that would happen, and I said, “What idiots we are, we should have known,” and then we couldn’t stop talking about Japi and how he wasn’t the freeloader we were used to anymore.

It took another month before Japi surfaced. His old man had found him a job and he was supposed to start on March 1. He didn’t say that he thought it’d be miserable. He would wait and see what he could make of it. He’d be earning fifty guilders a month. That night there was another severe frost. The stars were bright and terrifyingly high. The stove was cold. The three of us sat with our coats on, collars up, hats on, the way we sat so many times when we were tougher than the capitalist spirit and had nothing to heat the stove with.

Then Japi started talking and talking and wouldn’t stop. It was creepy. There you were, he said, hurtling on this earth through the icy blackness of space, where night never ends, the sun had disappeared never to rise again. The earth raced on through the darkness, the icy wind howling behind it. All these heavenly bodies hurtling desolately through space. If one of them hurtles into you then you’re lost, lost with all the other fifteen hundred million unlucky people. Japi sat shivering in his coat, it was freezing in the room.

Then he started in again on a different tack. The sun could be so beautiful, shining in the Waal River. He’d seen the sun shining in the Waal near Zaltbommel the last time he’d ridden the train over the bridge. Between the bridge and the city, the sun made a big patch of light on the water. The water flowed by and the sun just shone on it, a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand times. Two thousand years ago the sun was already shining on it and the water was flowing by. God knows how long it’s been. The sun had risen more than 700,000 times since then, it had set more than 700,000 times, and all that time the water was flowing. The math made him feel sick. How many rainy days had there been in all that time? How many nights had it gotten as cold as tonight, or colder? How many people had seen that water flowing by and seen the sun shining in it and seen all the stars on the nights as cold as this? How many people who are dead now? And how many will still see the water flowing in the future? And two thousand years, that’s nothing, the earth has existed for thousands and thousands more years than that and will probably exist for thousands more. The water will probably flow for thousands of years more, without him seeing it. And even if the world did end, that still didn’t really mean anything. There would be so much more time afterwards, time would never end. And all that time, he would be dead.

Japi’s teeth chattered. There was not a single sip of jenever left in the house and no way to get any on credit.

Then Japi got sentimental. He started to talk about Jeanne, for no particular reason, and as though we already knew everything about her. That her hands were so soft, and so warm, and how her eyes could sparkle. She had dark eyes and black hair. We started getting uncomfortable. He told us the most horribly private things, about a white lace dress, about a lavender silk dress, about her little white feet, about all sorts of body parts you can’t write about in a story.

By the end he was talking in French, we heard the words “*chéri*” and “*chérie*” several dozen times. (He pronounced the final “e” in “*chérie*.”) Then he was speaking Dutch again and got to the point. She was going to divorce her husband, a revolting old prune twenty years older than she was. We found it all rather banal. And on March 1 he had to show up at the office. Then he rubbed his face with his hands and said, “I’m leaving. Shake.” He stumbled down the stairs.

He did not show up on March 1. It was April before he was in any shape to go to work again. His freeloading days were over.

One evening a few months later, Bavink saw him sitting on the fourth floor of some office building. He was sitting in the window, working, and the place was brightly lit. Bavink went upstairs. Japi was alone and very busy. Bavink couldn't get anything out of him—he just kept working and hardly said a thing. Bavink nosed around, took a book off the shelf here and there, flipped through it, and put it back, shook his head, said “Whoa” a few times, turned the handle on the mimeograph, looked down at the street, and opened all the windows for some fresh air.

Outside a light snow was falling. Some snowflakes blew in. “Shut the windows, please,” Japi said, and kept writing. Then Bavink picked up a copy book, read a bit in it, shook his head again and again, and walked over to Japi, the copy book open in his hand.

“Hey, did you write all this?” Japi barely looked up and just said, “Not all of it.” “You're pretty damn smart after all,” Bavink said, “this business stuff isn't easy.” Then Bavink left.

VII

Japi turned into a hard worker. Not long after Bavink's visit they sent him to Africa. Within two years he was back: sick, half dead. No one heard anything from him until I saw him one November afternoon standing next to the stone wall of the Wijk bij Duurstede harbor. There he stood, staring at the mud. I had trouble recognizing him. He was dressed in a bulky gray coat, much too big for him, with a bulky gray cap down over his eyes and ears. He had on a pair of bulky wide square-toed brown shoes and there were several young men behind him. I thought: That looks like Japi, actually. And yes, it was him, a bit pale and thin and with no beard or mustache and with a strange staring look in his eyes, but definitely Japi.

Japi didn't see anything, didn't hear anything. I tapped him on the shoulder and said, “What are you doing here, how's it going, what's brought you here?” He stuck out his hand and said nothing, and was not surprised. “Just standing here staring,” he said.

“I can see that,” I said. “Come have a drink?” “Good,” Japi said. The louts who were leaning against the stone wall a ways off, amusing themselves for some time with very loud, ill-mannered commentary, now made very respectful greetings, since I had been throwing around quite a bit of money in Wijk bij Duurstede and had even slapped the notary on the back that very Sunday.

After a glass of jenever, some life came back into Japi. He had been working in Africa, tormented by the heat and the mosquitoes, had come down with a fever—spent more time suffering from fever than working or doing anything else. He'd come back that summer practically skin and bones.

His *française* was living in Paris with a young Dutchman who'd been articted to an office for a monstrously long time. Had another boyfriend too, a colonel. Treated him to dinner in Paris and called him a “good beast” in her broken Dutch and laughed in his face. Fastened her garter belt while he was right there so that he'd seen her bare knee. Then sent him away. He had to laugh. He wasn't in love anymore. She'd had a light blue silk slip on. One time he saw her having a drink with the colonel at an outdoor table. The colonel was acting very smug and looked savage and overbearing. She gave Japi the eye behind the colonel's back. She had lung problems and her months were numbered. Still, lively as ever. But had a hard time walking.

And what were Japi's plans? Still a freeloader? He freeloaded on his office, he said; the last day of every month he went and got his money.

Was he going to turn into such a ferocious worker again?

Oh, no. He had driven himself too hard. He'd aged fifteen years in the last three or four.

Then he lit a fresh cigar, one of mine, an expensive one with a band. I was doing well in those days. He took the band off.

He had toiled away, seen his share of misery. It started in Marchienne-au-Pont and Charleroi. He'd gone there for fun, with Jeanne. After three days she had had enough; he stayed. He showed me a little photograph: a grinning death's-head, the daughter of a worker in a glass factory. Seven children, five dead, and the sixth died while he was boarding there, she was the one in the photo. There he had learned to look, had seen what work really is. He'd always known how to have a damned good time spending money while other people earned it. Now he let it get to him and drove himself hard. Thought about becoming a socialist. He'd worked for his bread, been hounded, hounded and oppressed by people and by necessity, just like everyone else. He'd worked nights; in Amsterdam he came home from the office at one or two in the morning, then sat up, brooded, scribbled, written whole novels and burned them.

What could he do? What did they accomplish with all that? He let it get to him, dreamed up fiery speeches and ferocious articles while he sat in the office and worked on his boss's business, worked hard, everyone was amazed at the quantities of work he could put away. The world was still turning, turning exactly the way it always had, and it would keep on turning without him. He let it get to him. Now he was more sensible. He washed his hands of it. There were enough salesmen and writers and talkers and people who let it get to them—more than enough.

And they were always afraid of something and sad about something. Always scared to be late somewhere or get a scolding from someone, or they couldn't make ends meet, or the toilet was stopped up, or they had an ulcer, or their Sunday suit was starting to wear thin, or the rent was due; they couldn't do this because of that and couldn't possibly do that because of this. When *he* was young he was never that stupid. Smoke a couple cigars, chat a little, look around a bit, enjoy the sunshine when it was there and the rain when it wasn't, and not think about tomorrow, not want to become anybody, not want a thing except a little nice weather now and then.

You can't sustain that. He knew that. It couldn't last, it was impossible, you'd need a mountain of money. And he didn't have one. What his old man might leave him wasn't worth the trouble. And he, Japi, thought that was just fine. Now he spent his time staring. It's not like it's possible to accomplish anything anyway. He still hung around the places he used to like and spent his time staring into rivers. He got through several weeks staring in Dordrecht. In Veere he sat up on the roof of the Hospitaal for days. He'd spent September in Nijmegen.

And then, with a few variations, he repeated his old reverie about the water, how it flowed eternally to the west, out toward the sun every night. In Nijmegen there was a doctor who had taken the same walk at the same time every morning for fifty-three years—over the Valkhof hill and down the north side and up the Waalkade to the railroad bridge. That's more than 19,300 times. And always the water flowed to the west. And it didn't mean a thing. It must have flowed like that for a hundred times fifty-three years. Longer. Now there's a bridge over it. Since just a short time ago, a few years. Which is still a long time. Every year is 365 days; ten years is 3,650 sunrises. Every day is 24 hours, and every hour more goes through the heads of all those constantly worrying people than you could set down in a thousand books. Thousands of worriers who saw that bridge are dead now. And still, it's only been there a short time. The water there has been flowing for much, much longer. And there was a time when the water didn't flow there. That time was even longer, much longer. The worriers have died by the hundreds and hundreds of millions. Who remembers them now? And how many more are

going to die after them? They just worry away until God gathers them up. And you'd think God was doing them a favor when he suddenly wiped them away. But God knows better than you or me. All they want to do is fret, and struggle, and keep on struggling. And meanwhile the sun rises, the sun sets, the river there flows to the west and keeps flowing until that too will come to an end.

No, he had no more plans and he wasn't planning to let it get to him anymore either. He would make sure not to do that. He did accept an invitation to dinner that night, and even sang a funny song and gave a crazy speech standing on a chair.

Japi stared for a few months more. He was not in the best of health and the sick benefits from his office had run out. He spent the winter in Amsterdam, where everyone was busy tearing down beautiful houses to replace them with hideous ones, worrying the whole time.

In May he moved to Nijmegen.

He wrote me a postcard from there to say that Jeanne had died of her lung ailment. He had been waiting for that, he wrote.

At half past four one summer morning, during a majestic sunrise, he stepped off the bridge over the Waal. The watchman saw him too late. "Don't worry, old boy," Japi had said, then he stepped off the bridge, his face to the northeast. You couldn't call it a jump, the watchman said, he stepped off.

They found a walking stick in his room that had belonged to Bavink, and six notes on the wall saying "Dammit" and one with "All right then."

The river has kept flowing west since then and people have kept on worrying. The sun still rises too, and Japi's parents still get their *Daily News* every evening.

His trip to Friesland remains a mystery to this day.

1909–1910

YOUNG TITANS

I

WE WERE kids—but good kids. If I may say so myself. We’re much smarter now, so smart it’s pathetic. Except for Bavink, who went crazy. Was there anything we didn’t want to set to rights? We would show them how it should be. “We”: that meant the five of us. Everyone else was “them,” the ones who didn’t see it, didn’t get it. “What?” Bavink said. “God? You want to talk about God? Their pot roast is their God.” Other than a few “decent fellows” we despised everyone —and secretly, I still think we were right. But I can’t say that out loud to anyone now. I’m not a hero anymore. You never know who you might need later. Hoyer also thinks you shouldn’t offend anyone. No one ever sees or hears from Bekker anymore. And Kees Ploeger talks about the good-for-nothings who led him down the wrong path. But back then, in our crazy days, we were God’s chosen ones, we were God himself. Now we’re sensible, again except for Bavink, and we look at each other and smile and I say to Hoyer, “What did it all get us?” But Hoyer doesn’t see it that way, he’s a lost cause, he’s turning into one of the bigwigs of the Social Democratic Workers’ Party and all he does is raise his hands in doubt and shrug.

We were never clear about what we were going to do exactly, but we were going to do *something*. Bekker had some vague idea about blowing up all the offices, Ploeger wanted to make his boss pack his own clocks and then stand there watching him with a cigar in his mouth, cursing at people who can never do anything right. We were *unanimous* that we had to “get out.” Out of what, and how? The truth is we did nothing but talk, smoke, drink, and read books. And Bavink went out with Lien. Looking back, I think we were a magnificent bunch of young men, we deserved a fortune but despised “having lots of money”; Hoyer’s the only one who started to think a bit differently about that before long. Bavink didn’t understand why some people could ride in carriages whenever they wanted and wear expensive coats and order other people around who weren’t any dumber than they were. You didn’t see many automobiles yet in those days.

We spent whole summer nights leaning against the fence around Oosterpark and talking and talking. We could have earned enough for a whole living-room set if only we’d kept track of it all. People write so much nowadays.

A lot of the time we were less talkative. We sat on the curb until long past midnight, right on the street, and were melancholy and stared at the bricks and then up from the bricks at the stars. Then Bekker said that actually he felt sorry for his boss, and I tried to write a poem, and Hoyer said he had to stand up because the cold from the blue limestone curb was seeping into him. And when, in that short, balmy night, the darkness turned pale above our heads, Bavink sat with his head in his hands and spoke of the sun, almost sentimentally. And we thought it was a shame to have to go to bed, people should be able to stay up forever. That was one of the things we’d change. Kees was asleep.

And then we were off to the Zuiderzee to watch the sun come up, except for Kees, who went home. Hoyer complained about the cold but Bavink and Bekker didn’t notice it at all. They sat on the stones down on the dike with eyes half closed and looked through their eyelashes at the little arrows of dancing gold that the sun made in the water. The sight made Bavink go mad; he wanted to run across the long, long, glittering stripe all the way to the sun. But he stopped at the water’s edge after all and stood there. I remember one day when we, Bavink and I, went to the seaside and half the sun lay big and cold and red on the horizon. Bavink hit his forehead with his fist and said, “God, God, I’ll

never paint that. I'll never be able to paint that." Now he's in a mental hospital. When we came back from the Zuiderzee we couldn't see anything except yellow spots for a long time and our bosses didn't like these excursions of ours at all. I was half asleep at the office afterwards and Bekker, who could handle it better than I could, sat at his desk daydreaming about the sun all day and looked out at the lit-up treetops on the far side of the garden more than usual and longed for six o'clock more desperately than ever.

We were also big on excursions after work to the ring of dikes around the city. We sat in the grass down on the dike, among the buttercups, and inquisitive cows came up to us with their big eyes and looked at us and we looked at them. And then it was a sure bet that Bavink would start in about Lien. One way or another those cow eyes must have had something to do with it. And then the twilight started to shimmer, the frogs started croaking, one frog made a horrible racket right next to my shoe, my foot was almost in the ditch. You could hear other frogs softly, far, so far away. The cow that in the half dark you could hardly see anymore you could still hear, trimming the grass. One started mooing pitifully in the distance. A horse ran back and forth, you could hear it but not see it. The cow near us snorted and started to get restless. Bekker said: "It's nice here. If only it stayed like this." Bavink stood up and spread his arms wide and listened, and then sat down again and said that we didn't get it either, and we never would, he himself didn't get it, and really we were not much better than everyone else, and I think he was very nearly right about that.

No, we didn't actually do anything. We did our work at the office, not all that well, for bosses we despised—except Bavink and Hoyer, who had no bosses, and who didn't understand why we went in to see ours every day.

But we were waiting. For what? We never knew. Bekker said: "For the Kingdom of God." At least that's what he said once, without explaining any further. Bavink always talked about "the end that is also a new beginning." We knew exactly what he meant and said nothing more about it.

II

That summer we met almost every night at Kees's attic. Kees had decided he needed a "place" too. His place was the biggest and the easiest for all of us to get to. The neighbors didn't like everybody going up and down the stairs every night. Kees's father didn't see the point of the whole thing. Now Kees's father greets me very politely and calls me "Mister Koekebakker," because he's seen my name in the *Handelsblad*.

Bekker told Kees how he had to decorate it. They bought cheap wallpaper with a little flower pattern for three cents a roll and then glued it to the wall reversed so that the plain green backing faced out. Bekker wrote out a proverb in calligraphy and stuck it to the wall next to the door: "*J'ai attendu le Seigneur avec une grande patience, enfin il s'est abaissé jusqu'à moi.*"*

I don't know anymore where he got that from. Kees couldn't read it. But Kees did contribute something, he made a shovel and Bekker managed to attach it to the wall pointing at the proverb. It wasn't clear at first what it was supposed to mean, but later it turned out that Bekker wanted to go live on the heath someday and work a little piece of land, and never have to go back to the office. Bavink thought that was a good idea but was afraid Lien wouldn't agree, and Hoyer preferred to hang around in bars.

Then we sat there and tore everything to pieces. Or almost everything. I remember that Zola and Jaap Maris came out more or less unscathed, maybe one or two others. Bekker read to us from Dante,

he knew Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs and the Book of Job by heart. It was very impressive. Not much of the outside world made it into Kees's attic. The only window was almost shoulder-height off the floor; when you sat at the table, you couldn't see much more than a sliver of sky, the color slowly draining out of it, and a few stars when it was dark out.

Paint? Who still knew how to paint nowadays, to hear Bavink tell it! You could palm anything off on people today, literally anything. I should paint a picture myself—he was talking about me, Koekebakker. He would tell me what to do. “Paint two horizontal stripes, one on top of the other, same width, one blue and one gold, and then put a round gold bit in the middle of the blue stripe. We'll write in the catalog #666: *The Thought, oil on canvas*. And we'll submit it under my name: Johannes Bavink, Second Jan Steenstraat, number so-and-so, and we'll price it at eight hundred guilders. Then you can just sit back and see everything they come up with. They'll discover all sorts of things in there that you didn't have the slightest idea of.”

Bavink was still very young back then. Later on, Lien came over too sometimes and made tea. One time, she scrubbed the floor and dusted everything off, but that was very unpleasant. It caused some embarrassment for Kees when she came over, because his old man had definite misgivings about the young lady, and Bavink was never the way we liked him when Lien was around. He was always giving her little squeezes and pinches. It was annoying.

Luckily he started to leave her at home before long, because he thought she was making eyes at me. Bekker said “Girls, they're not worth it” and puffed on his clay pipe with especial satisfaction the first time she didn't come. And that evening it was really nice too. We sat for hours in the dark. The lamp got fainter and fainter, then went out. We just stayed there sitting and smoking, for hours. Every once in a while someone said something. Bavink decided that painting was the dumbest thing anyone could do. Kees didn't understand anything, as usual. “You have to just sit quietly and stay like that,” Bavink said, and looked up at the sky. A big greenish star twinkled. “You have to just sit quietly and stay like that and long with all your might, without knowing what for.” He filled a fresh pipe.

III

It was a strange time. And when I think about it, I realize that that time must still be happening now, it will last as long as there are young men of nineteen or twenty running around. It's only for us that the time is long since past.

We were on top of the world and the world was on top of us, weighing down heavily. Far below us we saw the world full of activity and industry and we despised those people, especially the important gentlemen, the ones who were always so busy and so sure they'd gotten pretty far in the world.

But we were poor. Bekker and I had to spend most of our time at the office and do whatever those gentlemen said, and listen to their ridiculous opinions when they talked to each other, and put up with the fact that they thought they were much more clever and capable than we were. And when they thought it was cold then all the windows had to be shut and in winter the lights had to come on much too early and the curtains had to be pulled shut so we couldn't see the red sky and the twilight in the streets and we had no say in it at all.

And we had to live on streets that were too narrow, with a view of the oilcloth curtains across the street and the tasseled fringe and the potted aspidistra with an impossible flower on top.

Oh, we took our revenge, we learned languages they had never even heard of and we read books

they couldn't even begin to understand, we experienced feelings they never knew existed. On Sundays we walked for hours on paths where they never went, and at the office we thought about the canals and the meadows we had seen and while they ordered us to do things that we didn't see the point of we thought about how the sun had set behind Abcoude on Sunday evening. And how we had thought our way through the whole universe, without words; and how God had filled our head, our heart, and our spine, and how stark raving mad they would look if we told them about it. And how, with all their money and their trips to Switzerland and Italy and God knows where else and with all their clever hard work, they could never feel such things.

But still, they had us in their power, they confiscated the greater part of our time, they kept us out of the sunshine and away from the meadows and the seaside. They forced us to constantly fill our thoughts with their incomprehensible business. Even though that only went so far. They chewed us out; at the office we were totally insignificant. "Ah, Bekker," they said to each other. The gentlemen had been well brought up; the woman on the third floor said "That harebrained idiot," but the gentlemen were too well brought up for that. And they were bright, much brighter than the woman on the second floor, whose husband was a lamplighter, a good job that didn't need much education. My boss asked me if I wrote poetry by any chance. Bekker thought that a man like him shouldn't utter the word *poetry*, shouldn't be allowed to. "What did you tell him?" I hadn't said anything, I only looked at his face and saw what a thick skull he had and I thought: "He doesn't know who he has standing here in front of him, he hasn't got the brains." And they paid us badly, the gentlemen did.

IV

And we were in love. For months Bekker went out of his way to walk down Sarphatistraat every morning. He was in love with a school-girl of seventeen or so, and he walked fifty steps behind her or on the other side of the street and he looked at her. He never knew her name, never said a word to her. Over Christmas break he was unhappy. In February he took an afternoon off to wait for her when school got out. He stood there on the quiet canal-side street in the snow and a man rode by on a white horse wearing a blue smock and a straw hat. How odd, that on precisely that afternoon he had had to see something so ludicrous. But Bekker left at five minutes to four, he didn't dare stay. He walked slowly away, and on Weteringschans she caught up to him. She was laughing loudly with a friend, another girl. I don't think she ever knew Bekker existed.

Bekker wanted me to tell him where this was heading, it couldn't go on like this. And it didn't either. After summer vacation she never came back.

"Girls," Bekker said, "they're not worth it.... She had a spring in her step when she walked." He turned the lamp up a bit and turned the page in the book he was reading. "Where do you think she is now? Do you think she's kissing someone?" A little spark fell from his pipe onto the book. He put it out with his matchbox. "Damn, a hole, that was stupid." "It's better this way, girls aren't worth it, they don't get you anywhere, they only distract you. They're pretty at a distance, to write poems about."

He read. After a short pause he looked up again.... "You know what the strange thing is? When she caught up to me that afternoon she walked past me, right next to me. She only just missed me. There was so to speak nothing separating us, a little clothing on her and practically none on me." (Bekker went around summer and winter with only an overshirt covering his bare chest.) "That's not much, you know?" I said it wasn't much—there was a lot more between the Naarden tower and Bekker's room, for example. "Between the Naarden tower and this mustache," Bekker said, "is much

less, *much* less, than there was between her shoulder and mine that day. No comparison, Koekebakker.” He turned another page, looked into the light, and said “That’s how it is,” and went on with his reading.

V

And so it was: God showed his face and then hid it again. You never got anywhere, especially if you only looked at the girls from a distance and let other men kiss their pretty faces, the important gentlemen they as a rule liked a whole lot more than us. They were so much more respectable and spoke so well. And we were bums.

There was nothing to hope for from God—who goes his own way and gives no explanations. If there was something we wanted we had to take care of it ourselves. But we realized that it was easy for Bavink and Hoyer to talk, they had talent, they could really accomplish something in the world, but we—Bekker and Kees and me—the only difference we’d ever make was as socialists and it did seem a bit weak, after sitting at God’s table, to address envelopes or join the Kastanjeplein Neighborhood Association. And nothing came of life on the heath either, because even when Bekker did get a little money his shoes needed repairing. Maybe we could join Van Eeden’s commune, but when we walked out to Bussum one Sunday, four hours on foot, we saw a man strolling around in a peasant smock and expensive yellow shoes, eating sponge cakes out of a paper bag, hatless, in inner harmony with nature as people used to say back then, with crumbs in his beard. We couldn’t bring ourselves to keep going, we turned right around and walked back to Amsterdam, walked along the Naarder canal in single file, singing, and a farm girl said to a farm boy, “There wasnt nothin about it in the paper, inn’t that some-thin? D’you know about that?”

VI

So we didn’t do anything. No, actually, that was when Bekker wrote his first poem.

I still remember it perfectly, it was on a Sunday, of course, because whenever anything happened it was on a Sunday. The other six days a week we spent dragging our chains around from nine to six.

I was out looking for a job in Hillegom, a job with a bulb dealer with fat red clean-shaven cheeks. The others decided right away to make a day of it. Bavink, Hoyer, and Bekker had all said so many times that they wanted to go to the Museum of Antiquities in Leiden, this was the day. Kees had to come too, he did whatever the others did. I was going to meet them in Leiden.

It was in December. I stood in the back of the tram, all the way in the back. It drove through the country and stopped and started again, it took hours, the countryside was endless. And the sky got bluer and bluer and the sun shone until it seemed like flowers would have to start sprouting out of the country bumpkins. And the red roofs in the villages and the black trees and the fields, most of them covered with straw, had it nice and warm, and the dunes sat bare-headed in the sun. And the road lay there, white and smarting, it couldn’t bear the sunlight, and the glass panes of the village streetlamps flashed, they had trouble withstanding the glare too.

But *I* got colder and colder. And the tram ran as long as the sun shone. It’s a long ride from Hillegom to Leiden and the days are short in December. By the end, a block of ice was standing there on the tram staring into the big stupid cold sun that was flaming red as though the revolution was

finally starting, as though offices were being blown up all over Amsterdam, but still it couldn't bring a spark of life back to my cold feet and stiff legs. And it kept getting bigger and colder, the sun, and I got colder and stayed the same size, and the blue sky looked down very disapprovingly: What are you doing on that tram?

Bekker wrote his first poem that afternoon. When I got to Leiden, as they were lighting the gas lamps, and I found the immortals sitting in a row on a long bench in the third-class waiting room at the train station, near the stove, it was my turn to undergo the poem. It was beautiful. No title? Bekker shook his head. But Bavink and Hoyer shrieked that they'd seen something written at the top. A well-dressed gentleman said "Louts" to the man who punched his ticket at the door. Bavink snatched the sheet of paper out of Bekker's hands. What was written at the top? Was it even a question? "To her." Just what I would have guessed.

Bavink thought the stove could use more coal but he couldn't find the scoop. They always take the scoop out of the waiting rooms, otherwise the public uses too much coal.

So Bavink tossed lumps of coal into the stove with his bare hands, and got into an argument with a guy in a white smock.

It was fun that night. Kees and Hoyer fell asleep on the train. Bavink chatted with a girl from The Hague and inhaled the smell of heliotropes given off by her dear little frame.

Then Bekker started talking about the heath again. How he wanted to live there in peace and wait and see what God had planned for him. And not have to *do* anything. He was deeply melancholy. I had an objection to the heath: it's so dry out there. And I asked Bekker what exactly he planned to live on, office workers don't usually do too well on the farm, except in America (we believed all kinds of lies about America). But he wasn't worried about that. He didn't need anything.

Now he knows better. Only God doesn't need anything. That is precisely the fundamental difference between God and us.

So life on the heath came to nothing too.

VII

Four of us sat in the fine white sand at the foot of the dunes in Zandvoort and looked out at the ocean. Kees wasn't there. It was late July. The sun was still high above the ocean at seven o'clock and it made, again, I can't help it, it's God himself who keeps repeating himself, it again made a long golden stripe in the water and shone in our faces.

A tugboat was puffing on the horizon. It rose and sank; when it sank we could only see the steam pipe.

Bekker was going to Germany the next day. His knowledge of languages had gotten him a job as a clerk in a factory handling foreign correspondence. And Hoyer was off to Paris, to paint.

Bekker in particular was deeply melancholy again. He wished he had never taken that job. He couldn't understand why he'd done it. He was in that miserable factory town for two hours, for the interview, and got sick, homesick. He fled back to the train station as fast as he could. The rails still lay there, luckily running straight to the horizon and beyond, back to Amsterdam. He had already bought his ticket, and on it was clearly printed, right there: "To Amsterdam." And the train came on time and carried him home along the rails, and when he got off at Centraal Station his heart was so full of emotion that he struck up a conversation with the engineer and gave him a cigar, an expensive cigar, and even stroked the locomotive with his hand and thought: "Ahh, nice locomotive." And then

he took the job anyway. It brought in a lot more money than he was making here. Now he had to go away and not see the ring of dikes around the city again. All that time the rails would be lying there, but he would only be able to go stand on the platform and watch the trains pull out in the evening, and all day Sundays, many times a day.

The sun was lower now, and red, the golden stripe was gone. It was a warm, still evening. The red water rippled a little, the waves rolled slowly in with a gentle hiss.

Bekker had a theory that he would save money and come back and go live on the heath. But in his heart he didn't believe it himself. We tried to believe it, even Hoyer tried, and we convinced ourselves that that's what would happen, but we didn't believe it. And it didn't happen either. Bekker came back a year later, he had saved a couple hundred guilders and he walked down Linnaeusstraat at half past eight every morning again with his sandwich in a bag from home. There's a lot a person needs.

But we weren't thinking about reused bags that night. We were doing our best to believe that we would still manage to accomplish something, really something. We would shock the world, unimpressive as we were, sitting calmly there with our legs pulled up and our eight hands clasping our eight knees. Hoyer had decided to paint all kinds of ordinary things. He had read an article in a magazine about the social duty of the artist, and now he was all in favor. He started to argue with Bekker about the heath. It was a miracle of erudition. He tried to convince Bekker that it was a mistake to withdraw from the world and go off to the heath, which he would never do anyway. An artist belongs at the center of modern life.

Hoyer wanted to hear what *I* thought. I just said I'd never thought about it. I didn't know what Hoyer wanted either—he *knew* it already, why did he need to know what I thought too?

Bavink was the only one who didn't say anything, he just sat with his chin on his knees and took the sun into his heart. The sun was as flat as a lozenge now, and dull red, almost gone.

Hoyer couldn't sit still. He jumped up and took Bekker with him. They walked along the beach and from a distance we could hear Hoyer screaming, he was obviously worked up. Bavink and I stayed sitting there for a while, then sauntered slowly after them. It wasn't very nice to have a worldview, it seemed to me. Hoyer was screaming so much.

Bavink and I stopped and looked down at the tips of our shoes and the waves rolling in over them. The sun was gone, the red shimmer on the water began to fade, a bluish darkness rose in the south. It smelled of mud. In the distance, near the village, the arc lamps suddenly came on along the beach.

"You understand all that?" Bavink asked. "About social duty?"

I shrugged. "What kind of guy d'you think wrote that article? Do *you* have a Sense of Responsibility, Koekebakker?" Hoyer had talked about that too.

"Hoyer sure talks nice," Bavink said. "Awfully nice. *I* don't have a sense of responsibility. I can't be bothered with that. I need to paint. It's not a walk in the park. What was it he said again?" "Who?" I asked. "The guy in that book, what was it he said artists were?" "Privileged." "You know what I think, Koekebakker? That that's the same guy who wrote the train timetables. I've never understood how anyone could write those either. Privileged ... God is everywhere, Koekebakker? Or isn't he? They say that too, don't they?"

I nodded. The darkness started to rise up everywhere from the water; the horizon to the northwest still glowed a yellowish green, the last light was leaving from over our heads. There were no clouds.

"So, he is everywhere," Bavink said. "There, and there, and there." He pointed all around us with an outstretched arm. "And there, beyond the sea, in the land we can't see. And over there, near Driehuis, where the arc lamps are. And on Kalverstraat. Go stand with your back to the water there

and listen. Can you stay out of it?"

"Out of what?"

"Out of the ocean?"

I nodded yes, I certainly could.

"I can't, or just barely," Bavink said. "It's so strange, having that melancholy sound behind you. It's like the ocean wants something from me, that's what it's like. God is in there too. God is calling. It's really not a walk in the park, he is everywhere, and everywhere he is he's calling Bavink. You get sick of your own name when it's called so much. And then Bavink has to paint. Has to get God onto canvas, with paint. Then it's Bavink who's calling 'God.' So there they are, calling each other. It's just a game to God, he is everywhere and without end. He just calls. But Bavink has only one stupid head and one stupid right hand and can only work on one stupid painting at a time. And when he thinks he has God, all he has is paint and canvas. It turns out God is everywhere except where Bavink wants him to be. And then some guy comes along and writes that Bavink is privileged and Hoyer memorizes it and goes around blathering it at Bekker. Privileged, right. You know what I wish? I wish I wrote timetables. God leaves people like that alone, they're not worth the trouble."

I offered Bavink a cigar and suggested we walk to Driehuis. I felt like a coffee. I didn't think it was very nice of Bavink to put down a useful fellow like that who was just doing his job. Behind us, Hoyer and Bekker came walking back; they were still going at it.

At eleven o'clock that night we were back on the beach. The wind had picked up, the waves hissed. A little something to drink had driven off the gloominess and melancholy. A new age was about to dawn. Bekker, in the solitude of his German boarding house, would translate Dante as he had never been translated before. Bavink had a great painting in his head, a View of Rhenen, he had been there once and could see it all clearly in his mind. And Hoyer was going to go work on his social duty—he would show them. And I tried to believe it all.

The cool wind blew around us. The ocean made a complaining sound, the ocean that complains and doesn't know why. The ocean washed woefully up onto the shore. My thoughts are an ocean, they wash woefully up against their limits.

A new age would dawn, we could still do great things. I did my best to believe it, my very, very best.

VIII

I stood in the twilight in Rhenen, on the bridge over the railroad tracks, and looked north. Far below me were the rails, running out to the horizon, with the hill rising up steep on either side, overgrown with light green grass and dark green gorse covered in yellow flowers. I looked at how the slope of the hill got lower and lower until, far away, it became the flat plain.

Again the darkness started creeping stealthily up out of the ground, the way I had seen it do so many times before. The last light of day rested on the mountaintop, nervous and afraid, while the valley was full of darkness, and a red light came on on a post by the tracks. The sky was coated in gray and looked colorlessly down on the beaten, defeated day.

I had been away for six years and now I was standing there, just back in Holland, in the place I had thought about so often, which they had described in almost every letter they wrote me (every year Bavink wrote me at least twice, Bekker a bit more often). Back at the hill that Bavink had sent me seven drawings of over the years and Bekker had written two very short poems about.

I had come back to Holland to suffer poverty and write articles and stories in the neighborhood where I had lived for so long. And I wanted to go through my last two rijksdollars in the city that for a while, in my absence, had been the center of the world.

In the north the darkness was gulping down the light, the mountain was nearly swallowed up, the day's last escort fled to the northwest and I stood on the little bridge on the edge of nothingness, enveloped in infinity.

I leaned my elbow on the railing and propped my chin in my hand and looked into the darkness and thought about the flat red sun that had set long ago into the green waves of the Atlantic—waves that rose up with sharp edges and scooped-out sides and fell and rose and were rising and falling even now. About the yellow lights in the shops in the poorer neighborhoods of Amsterdam, which I would shortly see again, which had shone every night while the ocean never stopped moving.

And the vague expectations from back then rose within me again, and the longing, without knowing what for.

But I also had a feeling I hadn't known before. All those days had passed and many more days would pass as well, and on every one of them my expectations would remain unfulfilled and my longings unsatisfied. Bavink had worked for years, on and off, on his View of Rhenen—on the river, the mountain, the Cunera tower, the blossoming apple trees, the red roofs of the city, the chestnut trees with their red and white flowers and the brown beeches between the houses in the distance, and the little windmill somewhere up on the mountain. For years Bekker had spent every Sunday in the cabin on the mountain that Bavink rented, translating Dante and writing little poems now and then, for years I had drifted around the world. And what did it all mean? For the world, for God, or even for us?

I stood on the Rhenen tower and looked into the distance, and my heart went out into the distance, to the red sky in the west. But even if I could have flown off the top of the tower into that distance, I would have found only that the distance had turned into the nearby, and my heart would have gone out to the distance once more. And what good did it do me—the wisdom that taught me that nothing would ever change, it would be like this forever?

Every day we longed for something, without knowing what. It got monotonous. Sunrise and sunset and sunlight on the water and behind the drifting white clouds—monotonous—and the darker skies too, the leaves turning brown and yellow, the bare treetops and poor soggy fields in the winter—all the things I had seen so many times and thought about so many times while I was gone and would see again so many more times, as long as I didn't die. Who can spend his life watching all these things that constantly repeat themselves, who can keep longing for nothing? Trusting in a God who isn't there?

And now the gorse was blooming again, and the lilacs and apple trees and chestnuts, and the sun was blazing down on all of it. Full of emotion, I had seen it all again. And while I was thinking about it, my vague longings and expectations faded away.

God lives in my head. His fields are immeasurable, his gardens are full of beautiful flowers that never die, regal women walk there naked, thousands of them. And the sun rises and sets and shines low and high and low again and the endless domain is endlessly itself and never the same for an instant. Broad rivers run through it, curving and meandering, and the sun shines on them and they carry the light to the sea.

I sit quiet and content beside the rivers of my thoughts and smoke a clay pipe and feel the sunshine on my body and see the water flow ceaselessly into the unknown.

The unknown doesn't bother me. I nod now and then to the beautiful women plucking the flowers in my gardens and I hear the wind rustling through the high pines, through the forests of certainty, of

knowing that all this exists whenever I decide to think it. I am grateful that this has been given to me. And I puff on my pipe in all humility and feel like God himself, who is infinity itself.

I sit there aimlessly, God's aim is aimlessness.

But to keep this awareness always is granted to no man.

IX

When I arrived in Amsterdam, about nine the next morning, and stood on the square in front of Centraal Station, I saw lots of electric streetcars, which I had never seen there before, and taxis, and policemen with caps instead of helmets. But they hadn't filled in the Damrak yet, I saw the backs of the houses on Warmoesstraat right on the water and the Oude Kerk spire up above. So that was all right.

And the same fine gentlemen were still walking around, their hair was perfect and there was not a crease in their jackets or a speck of mud on their shoes. They still looked like they knew absolutely everything and felt that they'd pretty much succeeded in life. They were friendly and polite to each other, as always. Their clothes were slightly different from a few years before, but basically the same. You could see that they had everything figured out: A suit was a suit, same as ever, and a jacket was still a jacket, and a respectable woman was still a respectable woman and a girl was a girl. It all worked out perfectly. And they also knew perfectly well who and what were beneath them, I had no doubt about that. The Damrak would certainly be filled in too once they got around to it.

I took Tram 2 down Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal. So it was a good thing they'd filled it in after all, otherwise the tram probably couldn't drive down it, and now you could cross from one side to the other wherever you wanted.

Tram 2, the line par excellence for fine and important gentlemen. A couple of terribly important gentlemen were on the tram, I was *nothing* next to them. The good old sun was shining happily down on Voorburgwal, the buds on the trees were still pale green, and I saw that the shadow of Nieuwe Kerk didn't reach the other side of the street, not by a long shot. And I remembered that years before, in late May, I had seen the same shadow looking exactly the same. And that on a sunny winter day, when there were no trams on Voorburgwal yet, I had walked through the shadow of the church which covered the whole width of the street. Now it didn't even reach the rails, the tram drove past the church in the sunlight. In a few months the same tram (it was still brand new) would be driving in the same place through shadow. And when I looked back at the two terribly important gentlemen, I decided that the whole time Rhenen had been the center of the world, this world had hardly changed at all.

I thought about when these two gentlemen would die, and stand naked at the Last Judgment, and be forgotten down here. And about terribly important gentlemen coming and taking their place. Would they still have their silent self-possession when they arrived up there without their nicely polished shoes? And what would become of the perfect part in their hair? What about their idiotic air of superiority, might their faces not show a hint of modesty when they got there and saw the other, even more important men they had looked up to for so many years, and they were naked too?

And how many idealistic young people down here would have written essays by then, and written little poems and painted little pictures, and gotten angry and gotten excited about things. And kissed. And then grown important too, perhaps, and been forgotten as well.

Then a girl with a violin got on the tram and looked at the tips of her shoes with her dark eyes, and I looked at the rounded curves of her summer coat and forgot all about the elegant gentlemen.

X

Hoyer was home. He had a very proper apartment in a side street behind the Concertgebouw and he received me in a sitting room I hardly dared walk in because the carpet was so expensive. His curtains were velvet, his chairs were upholstered in yellow moquette, a black pendulum clock and candelabras were on the mantelpiece and I think I saw a bronze horse somewhere, all things from expensive shops. I didn't dare to really sit down either, I sat on the edge of the chair the whole time, but I don't think Hoyer noticed a thing.

Hoyer had had an amazing stroke of luck. They had made the same old stupid mistake and refused one of his nudes. He'd named the lady *Lust* and I must say, since I am writing for a respectable publication, that she did look "very nice." And now Hoyer was living large in furnished rooms managed by an elegant widow with an aristocratic name, along with a female lawyer and a colonial official on leave with his wife and child. Hoyer ate out since the widow was far too elegant to cook for her boarders. Shoeshines cost extra.

And I sat on the edge of my chair the whole time and looked at the ornamental table legs and the gilded frame of the mirror. It was deadly. I had to tell Hoyer about my trip, of course, but I didn't know what to say, I heard myself talking and listened, scatterbrained, to the sound of my own voice. The light in the room was dim and gloomy, I think the widow was afraid of people looking in. I just wanted to leave, and I looked around at the three walls I could see without turning around in my chair but they didn't dissolve, I couldn't see through them. I looked at the door—I couldn't help it—I sat there staring helplessly. My eyes were just drawn to the door. I had vague visions of Cunera, of the Grebbeberg with its river, of the sunny square in front of Centraal Station and the clockface gleaming on the Oude Kerk spire, and through these semitransparent visions I saw the painted grain of the fake oak wood on the door. Someone was talking the whole time, oh, right, Hoyer. Then I myself answered, or not actually my self, but my tongue did move and sounds did come out of my mouth, I could hear them loud and clear.

Hoyer didn't notice *anything*. His studio was upstairs. Shall he lead the way? I numbly followed. "This must be the lavatory?" I thought something along those lines was the proper thing to say when a gentleman was showing you his house. Hoyer didn't notice *anything*. "No, that's a closet," he said. And I thought, why didn't he say, "I beg your pardon, that's a closet"? Surely that's what he would be saying within a year or two.

The hall was a tight squeeze, the runner was narrow, the stairs proportioned accordingly, there was a thin banister with slightly turned posts, but everything was very fine and in good taste, I have to admit. Hoyer still didn't notice anything.

Upstairs I recovered a bit, at least there was light, the famous "studio light." The easel stood empty. There was an expensive chair in the studio and I sank into it. Never in my life had I sat in such a chair. Hoyer was painting portraits these days, of ladies and gentlemen, all in elegant clothing. He showed me the portrait he had just started of the lawyer in the building. She was traveling at the moment. Hoyer used to have his studio in another building at first, but the lawyer had convinced "Madame" to allow part of the attic to be converted into a studio. They had had a hard time persuading her and managed to only when she heard that Hoyer was going to paint a portrait of a

young lady from Willemsparkweg, in winter hat, boa, and muff. And the rest of her clothes too, of course. And that he had been put forward as a member of Arti et Amicitiae.

Did Bavink ever come by? No, never, he'd never been here. Had he heard anything about Kees? Yes, Bavink had run into Kees on the street a while back and they had talked. He had gone through three or four jobs in the past couple years, with long stretches unemployed in between. His father had finally found him something with the gas company.

"He walks around now in a uniform and a cap, he has Amsterdam's three white Xs and 'AmGas' on his head and a little book under his arm. And another guy with him, with a black bag." Bavink found it quite a sight. His job is to go around emptying the two-penny coins out of the gas meters, the other guy's job is to carry them around his bag. And after they've gotten the coins out, Kees has to go ask the lady of the house if she wants twopenny coins back again in change for the meter. Bavink spent a while with him, he had never walked along with someone doing that before. But it got boring fast. He never did it again.

I gazed at the Bokhara carpet lying in front of the club chair and saw clearly before my eyes the deserted cobblestones of Linnaeusstraat and the blue limestone curb and the seam where two stones were set next to each other, and the bricks of the sidewalk. I saw us sitting there in the summer night. Bavink and Bekker and Kees and Hoyer and me. I saw that the cobblestones and the dust on the street were wet, the watering cart had been by, there was a wet sheet of newspaper somewhere. And I heard Hoyer say that he was standing up, the cold from the stone was seeping into him. Now I was hearing the same voice, only a little more refined, more modulated, saying: "You must excuse me, Koekebakker, I have a consultation at eleven."

Outside, the spring sun shone down on the cheerless street. My God, how could a street like this exist. I was absolutely not allowed to kiss the girl in the tram but a street like this was allowed to exist. *That* was allowed.

XI

On one of the grand canal streets I stood on the stairs and read on the door: "P. Bekker, Agent, Sales on Commission." I rang the bell and waited. It took a long time. Then the top half of the door swung open and I saw a young man with a blockish head. "Is Mister Bekker in?" That sounded strange. While the young man opened the bottom half of the door, not without some difficulty, I remembered how the front door used to open without my seeing anyone, there was a cord he could pull from upstairs, and I would yell "Hi, Bekker!"

"Is Mister Bekker in?" Mister Bekker was with someone at the moment. A large roll of carpets was lying in the marble passageway. "Who may I tell him is here?" "Koekebakker." "Would you follow me, please?" The young man went first, up a narrow staircase that changed direction too many times to count.

Upstairs, at the end of a dark narrow hallway, he stopped. In the dim light I could just make out the words "Samples Room." "Is this where I'm supposed to wait, friend?" I asked, pointing at the words. I could tell that Friend found me a bit odd. "We've just never changed the sign, sir." He knocked.

I heard Bekker's voice call out "Yes." The friend went in and the door shut behind him and there I was.

Would I be so kind as to wait here? I was led to a small back room with a view of a blind wall. A

massive roll of packing paper hung on a bar from the ceiling, with the end of the paper hanging down above a large, empty packing table. The young man went and sat at a little desk by the window, with his back to me, and started to tap on a typewriter. I looked at the packing paper hanging there, I saw that it had been torn off at an angle, I looked at the office worker's broad, bent back and bony shoulders and at the blind wall out the window. One of the bricks was broken and dark red inside; that crumbled piece of brick was the most beautiful thing I saw.

The worker typed away at God knows what. Whenever he stopped for a moment I could hear two men's voices through the closed door, and recognized Bekker's voice without being able to make out any words. I sat there for twenty minutes, dying. *Per me si va nella città dolente.*^{*}

Then the door opened and Bekker appeared. He was nervous and embarrassed. How was I doing? I looked good. He was terribly sorry. He was with a client, from Bordeaux, the man had come especially to see him. He didn't think he could get rid of him before late that evening.... "You understand—man, you sure look good. Just back from Algiers?" I understood perfectly. Yes, back from Algiers. "Where are you staying? If I can I'll come by and see you at nine tonight." I wasn't staying anywhere, I was out of money, but that's not something you can say in an office with a stranger standing right there. So I said I didn't know yet. I'd drop by again later. "Better luck next time!" I knew he'd say that. It's one of those things that fine men and women say to each other where you don't even need to listen.

He brought me to the front door. He thought it was a damn shame. I looked at the little sign, "P. Bekker, Agent, Sales on Commission," then into his eyes. And I saw that he suddenly heard it too, the cow mooing, the cow in the twilight ten years ago that you could hear but not see. We shook each other's hand. "*Per me si va tra la perduta gente*, Koekebakker." He held my hand tight and put his other hand on my shoulder. "Let me know if you need any money, okay?"

I went down the front stairs. The client was standing at the window with his hands on his hips, legs spread wide, looking out at the street. He looked rich and well-fed. I respectfully doffed my hat to him and he returned the greeting, politely and graciously.

XII

I'm coming to the end now, slowly but surely. Thank God, someone will say. Ach, I knew before I started that this wouldn't amount to much. What does the life of an Amsterdammer ever amount to, these days? When I was young there were so many times when I wished something would happen, anything. But nothing ever happened. We never even changed address. And later ...

Only Hoyer knows what it all adds up to. He inherited some money, now he's loaded. He's a member of the Social Democratic Workers' Party, and he reads *The People*.

In the evening he sits in the reading room and leafs through the *Berlin Tageblatt*. He doesn't paint anymore. And he has a reason why he doesn't paint too: it's because we live in an age of decline. A new art is coming, he is sure of it, and waiting for it to arrive. Meanwhile, he brings Art to the People—how, I don't know. A bricklayer asked him once: "What does all that nonsense get me?" Hoyer had an explanation for that too: "We Social Democrats know only too well...."

He says loads of things that are absolutely true, and when you start to think "Now *this* is getting interesting," that's when he stops. One afternoon in Café Poland he had a whole lot to say about "proletarian sentiment" and "bourgeois ideologies." I just listened. One time I said to him, "It's wonderful how you understand everything so well."

At that he started right in again and I couldn't get a word in edge-wise for half an hour. And it really is wonderful, to someone who has to do what other people tell him his whole life without understanding much about it himself, and who is constantly being snarled at and has to eat margarine and live in stuffy little apartments. If I was allowed to keep even the slightest doubt I would join the Social Democratic Workers' Party too. One good thing, though: the people who always end up in stuffy apartments don't need me. And maybe they'd manage, somehow, without Hoyer too. I should check if it is allowed: doubt.

Things went badly with the agency, sales on commission. The sales on commission part was total nonsense, Bekker had just put it there because it sounded good, and someone who has translated Dante and written poems, even if there were only thirteen of them, should not be an agent for domestic and foreign firms. On a rainy December day, with the lamps lit along the canal, I found Bekker leaning on his desk with his head on his hand. The room was half dark. He was motionless. I turned on the gaslight. There was three days' mail, unopened, in the wastepaper basket behind him. He'd shoved the whole pile in with his elbow, deliberately, without looking at it. He had gotten rid of his employee months ago. They'd taken away his phone. There he sat. A list of steamship departures hung on the wall; the most recent one had long since returned and set sail again, several times. On the mantel was a thick book: a deluxe edition of the *Divina Commedia*.

The lamps were burning outside, pale and strange in the last light of day, like some unaccountable mistake. The way they so often did. Everything seemed like an unaccountable mistake.

Bekker is back working in an office now, with a good boss, who respects him for having translated Dante. On days when the weather is fine he lets Bekker leave early, so that he can walk around a bit in the sun.

Bekker didn't turn to drink. He solves chess problems or sleeps. He has no vision of the future and no longings, not even for six o'clock. What good are they anyway? He takes a melancholy pleasure in collecting his salary, and a melancholy pleasure in using it to buy neckties and shoes. His clothes are properly brushed. Sometimes he feels a little pleased with himself for having "lived the life of the mind" once.

He still goes and looks at a painting every once in a while. I ran into him recently. He told me about *The Arrival of Queen Wilhelmina at Frederiksplein*, Eerelman's painting, the one with the ad for ODOL mouthwash painted on it so naturally. Wouldn't that be a lovely painting to hang in a fancy pharmacy, he said.

Kees is still working for the gas company and living in one of those stuffy little apartments I mentioned. He doesn't know where they'll find room for the next kid to sleep. The children are still small but in a year or two they'll be squabbling every morning over the one faucet and the one bathroom, the way it always goes in District III neighborhoods. He struggles with what Hoyer calls "the chronic shortages in working-class households" and buys cigars only on Saturday nights. On Sunday he has to keep the children in line. He gripes about how he'd be doing so much better if he had only listened to his father sooner.

His wife is good to him. He gets a clean handkerchief in the middle of the week. But she wouldn't awaken desire in anyone who isn't used to her like Kees is. It was different six years ago.

In his father's attic, where Kees used to have his "place," his sisters' underwear is hanging up to dry.

And Bavink?

In the battle against the “goddamned things,” Bavink lost, or surrendered. The things that wanted to be painted and then, when you thought “Well in that case it’ll have to happen,” turned out not to want to be painted after all. He was just starting to become famous when the struggle came to an end.

Two months after my return he came and told me, in a very calm voice, that he had cut his View of Rhenen to pieces. And so he had. The river, the mountain, the Cunera Tower, the blossoming apple trees, the red roofs of Rhenen, the chestnut trees with their red and white flowers, the brown beeches and the little windmill somewhere up on the mountain—into sixty-four identical rectangles 15 by 12 1/2 cm each, with a blunt penknife. It was hard work too.

The thing just wouldn’t stop pestering him. It was worthless, totally worthless garbage. He wanted me to tell him why anyone would paint. What’s the point? He didn’t know anything anymore. He stretched out his arm and waved it around. There, that’s where the things are. He hit his forehead with his fist. And *here*. They want to come out, but they don’t come out. It’s enough to drive you out of your mind.

Almost a year later I saw him at Centraal Station, seeing someone off on the eight o’clock train to Paris, a hairy guy with long black curls and a huge beard, more hair than man, and a high forehead with nothing behind it. The setting sun shone big and red, it was at the edge of the glass and metal roof, there was a reddish light in the windowpanes and the varnish on the train cars. Bavink was drunk. The train pulled away, slid out from under the station roof and curved to the left. As it turned, the light flashed brightly on the cars.

We strolled to the end of the platform. We came to a man with a signal lamp and I saw that as he passed us he looked at a conductor standing on another platform and made a drinking movement with his hand near his mouth. We stopped past the end of the roof and looked at the sun. “You see the sun, Koekebakker?” The sun was especially clear, right in front of us, close by, bigger and redder than I had ever seen it. It almost touched the rails, it didn’t flash brightly on things anymore, there was a dull glow only on the frosted windowpanes of the train shed to the right of the track.

“You think I’m drunk?” I did indeed. “It doesn’t matter, Koekebakker, when I’m sober I don’t understand anything anyway.”

“Do you understand what the sun wants from me? I have thirty-four setting suns leaning against the wall, one on top of the other, all facing the wall. But every evening it’s there again.”

“Unless it’s cloudy,” I said. But he wouldn’t let himself be distracted.

“Koekebakker, you’ve always been my best friend. I’ve known you since—how long has it been?”

“About thirteen years, Bavink.”

“Thirteen years. That’s a long time. You know what you need to do? Do me a favor. You have a hatbox?”

I didn’t say anything.

“Put it in a hatbox, Koekebakker. In a hatbox. I want to be left alone. Put it in a hatbox, a plain old hatbox. That’s all it’s worth.”

Bavink blubbered drunkard’s tears. I looked around helplessly. A man in a uniform with a yellow stripe on his cap came up to us and spoke to me.

“I think it would be better, sir, if you took the gentleman home.” I saluted and held out my arm for Bavink. He came willingly. He fell asleep in the taxi and woke up for a minute on Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal when we drove over a pothole, and he wanted to start in on the hatbox again. But he fell right back asleep.

One morning he sat staring blankly in front of his last sunset. I arrived at his place with Hoyer. He didn't recognize us. He just looked at the sun, a big cold red sun setting behind the clouds.

"It just looks at me, neither of us knows what to do with each other." He didn't say anything else.

Now he's in an institution. It's very peaceful there and he's calm. He just looks up at the sky, or gazes at the horizon, or sits staring into the sun until his eyes hurt. He's not supposed to do that but they can't get anywhere with him. They can't get him to talk. His paintings fetch a high price nowadays.

And old Koekebakker has turned into a sedate and sensible man. He just writes, receives his humble wages, and doesn't cause trouble.

God's throne is still unshaken. His world just takes its course. Now and then God smiles for a moment about the important gentlemen who think they're really something. A new batch of little Titans are still busy piling up little boulders so that they can topple him down off his heights and arrange the world the way they think it should be. He only laughs, and thinks: "That's good, boys. You may be crazy but I still like you better than the proper, sensible gentlemen. I'm sorry you have to break your necks and I have to let the gentlemen thrive, but I'm only God."

And so everything takes its little course, and woe to those who ask: Why?

Finished January 1914

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

AGAIN the longest day was past. The days were getting shorter—it was still barely noticeable but we knew it was happening, this summer too would pass. Again the day came to an end, again the bright red above the horizon grew pale, the water in the distance kept its color, but barely, darkness crept up everywhere, out of the earth, now the canal in the distance had vanished in the night. We were gloomy about all the things that had passed, and about our lives, which would end while all these things continued to exist. We would see the days get longer a few more times, then we wouldn't be young anymore. And after that, when the chestnut trees had blossomed red or white a few more times, we would die, in the prime of our lives or maybe as old men, which would be even worse. And the sky would be red again and the canal would still be there too, most likely, gold in the twilight, and they wouldn't notice any difference.

Then Bavink said "I'm going to be famous" the way someone else would say "They overcharged me ten cents," and we all felt we had gotten the short end of the stick, all three of us, Bavink and Bekker and me.

Then Bavink told us about a visit he had received from a gentleman he'd never met, a short, well-fed man in a suit jacket. Bavink remembered his name and it turned out I knew him, we went to school together, back when he was still a scheming kid.

He'd come on assignment from a magazine founded by another ambitious gentleman who had poured a ton of money into it and gone around collecting original opinions and slogans and ideas from all sorts of people and presented them as his own, and still didn't get famous, and then later he gave up too.

"So," I said, "he came 'on assignment'?" And all three of us had to laugh, we laughed our heads off, though Bekker was a little subdued because he sometimes wore a suit coat himself, and a top hat and white tie too not long ago, to help bury a client, and he had almost said a few words by the grave and had come home with a cold.

"What was he really there for?" "To make my acquaintance." "How did it go?" "It started well," Bavink said, "but I think the guy couldn't really make heads or tails of me."

Bavink had started by saying that he was incapable of talking seriously—a funny thing to say right off the bat to a man like that, who in the first place is a serious person and secondly is there on assignment. The man had done his best to laugh and then said, "You must be joking, Mister Bavink."

Then even Bekker had to laugh and call himself an idiot and say he was going to quit his job and sell his suit and smoke cigars with the money. Which of course he didn't do.

And Bavink had answered that he wasn't joking and the man was completely flummoxed. He couldn't sneer at Bavink because he had heard from well-known persons that Bavink "was doing remarkably fine work."

"So I presume," he'd said, and paused for a second and peered at Bavink through his pince-nez and then said again, "So I presume that you put all of your seriousness into your work?"

"What would you have done then, Koekebakker, if it was you there?" The fellow had spoken with so much respect that Bavink had thought "What an absolute ass he is" but didn't dare to say anything.

"You know what I would have done, Bavink? I would've asked if he wanted a smoke." "That's exactly what I did too, and he said, 'No thank you, I don't smoke.'"

The fellow talked like he was reading out loud from a newspaper. He understood perfectly well that Bavink did not want to talk about himself, he himself felt the same way, it is always rather

unpleasant, but you simply can't always avoid it, you understand, life carries with it certain obligations and an *artist* (the guy really emphasized that word) more or less belongs among those who ... Then Bavink thought that he might as well say something that sounded like it was straight out of a speech too, so he said: "Indubitably." The guy was taken aback. He was happy to hear that Mister Bavink shared his opinion with respect to this point—guys like that always call these things "points"—and as a result he took the liberty of asking Mister Bavink in all candor whether it was true what certain newspapers (he called them "journals") had printed, namely that he was, to a great degree, a *great* degree, indifferent to fame?

"Jesus," said Bavink, "there I was, I thought if Hoyer was here he'd know what to say to him."

"And what did you say?"

"I asked him: Is that what it said in the paper?"

"Don't you read the newspapers?" he said then, just like a normal person.

"I'll be damned," Bekker said, "so he wasn't going to leave empty-handed after all. Now he can write in his little rag that Johannes Bavink never reads the newspaper."

"That's what I thought too," Bavink said. "Now he's got his hands on something, now I'll never get rid of him. He was already starting in with his notebook."

"What a mess," I said. "Mess? You have no idea. What was I supposed to do then? How could I get rid of him? The longer he sat there the more room he took up. I saw him growing and spreading, he filled my whole studio and the whole street was full of the little men, everyone the three of us, Hoyer too, have seen for all these years on the street, everywhere, they were standing out on the street and I knew they were standing there. My studio looked at me like it didn't know me anymore, I wasn't Bavink anymore, I felt like I was Bekker with some factory owner on the phone." "Hey," Bekker said. "That can happen," I said. "You hear that, Bekker? I said that can happen. It's a lousy feeling. You know I feel sorry for you." "Hey," Bekker said. We fell silent.

"You know, Koekebakker, how at your last job you had to ask every evening before you could go home if the receipt was on the spindle?"

"Sure."

"And how every time you asked that you felt like you had muttonchop sideburns?"

"Definitely." "So, it was like that. I thought about you and I felt like I was turning into a 'fellow' like that guy, just from him sitting there across from me. I thought, I'm about to start talking about intellectual currents, where are these words even coming from? It all happened in just the time it took for the guy to start up again and say, 'Sir, you ...'"

Again we fell silent. In the long run, you can't fight them, there are so many of them and they're always right. They had a reason to exist. We were the ones with no reason to exist. That's the way it *had* to be, it was God's will. Bekker looked down at the ground, between his knees.

"How did you get rid of him?" I asked. "I was furious," Bavink said. "Goddammit, I can't help it if I paint my pictures and I have to sell them. But I kept my wits about me. I interrupted and said: 'Sir,' I said, 'I am terribly sorry to have nothing to offer you, but there's nothing in the house.' I was talking as fancy as I could. 'I regret to say that I don't believe we understand one another.' He raised his eyebrows. 'Perhaps we might understand each other better in ten years, but today, we do not understand each other.' I stood up and he stood up too. 'I appreciate your good intentions ...'"

"I appreciate your good intentions!" Bekker said.

"That's what I said," Bavink said. "Where did *those* words come from? 'I appreciate your good intentions, but I'm afraid I don't think we have one single intelligent word to say to each other. If there is anything else about me you'd like to know, may I suggest you pay a visit to Mister Hoyer ...'"

“What?!” both of us cried at the same time.

““Pay a visit to Mister Hoyer,’ I said, ‘on Van Woustraat, he can tell you everything you need to know and he talks like a newspaper. 28 Van Woustraat.’”

We sat there thunderstruck.

The fellow had stayed perfectly polite, he wrote down the address with a fountain pen, thanked Mister Bavink, and said, “Don’t trouble yourself, I can find my way out, thank you.”

“If the guy plays his cards right,” Bekker said—who owned his own business, and looked up with his head still in his hands—“he’ll get a nice little article out of that. It doesn’t matter about Hoyer, he deserves it.”

And again we sat silent and thought about how we had no reason to exist.

This was written many years ago, in a distant time, probably 1913 or 1914.

OUT ALONG THE IJ

1. *Discovery*

BAVINK and Bekker walked up ahead, then came Kees on his own. They had stuck me with Hoyer. It was a November afternoon; the low sun was behind us, above the middle of the Zeeburgerdijk. Hoyer walked with his coat unbuttoned—the only overcoat between the five of us. It was an especially beautiful, mild day. Pastures spread out on the low ground to the right, pale green and sodden. In front of us, at the foot of the dike, the trees in the Jewish Cemetery stood tall and gnarled and cast a pale purple reflection. The sky above our heads was pale blue; when we turned around we saw the sun shining in the Spui canal and the sides of run-down wooden sheds that were usually just ugly gray boards, but they were shining in the light, the whole world all around us was shining in the light, the earth gave off light and the world was ours for as far as our eyes could see, and farther.

We were walking out of the city, walking hard, the soles of Hoyer's shoes (which were intact) clattered on the stones. Bavink brandished his walking stick above his head and I gave Hoyer a little shove. We were in high spirits, and excited about nothing, about the weather, the sunshine, the light all around us that we breathed and the sky above us that we saw. We were heading out to conquer the world, except for Hoyer, he was the only one who didn't believe in that, all he knew was that he was out for a walk on Zeeburgerdijk, past the slaughterhouse.

But when we came to the end of the dike and saw the Zuiderzee before us, Hoyer fell silent too, as silent as the water, which was as white-blue as the sky above. To the north, behind the levee, the Outer IJ was chalk-white. A barge and a little tugboat were steaming in toward the city, from east to west; they were on the other side of the levee but their steam was reflected in the water on this side. And a tjalk was sailing there with a white sail, its clew listing to port. Farther past it was Durgerdam, with its houses on the dike and its two little towers and a few bare trees black between them, and along the quay a few very small ships with their puny masts reaching up into the sky. To the right, offshore, there was smoke from invisible steamships.

God was good that afternoon, and merciful. His world came in through our eyes and lived in our heads, and our thoughts went wordlessly out across the world, far beyond the horizon they went. And so we and the world took turns flowing into and through each other: Bekker said he could feel his heart swell and when I shut my eyes tight it was as though my head was filled with golden light and blue water, and wonderful shivers ran up and down my spine. I felt the world that lay around me.

We walked farther. Someone had turned the soil in a little garden next to a house and the wet black clumps of earth glowed dully. There was a low dog-rose hedge around it, the sun shone down on it. A man was spading the last corner. His smock was light blue with a dark square piece on the front. And just when the man straightened up to look at us the sun shone onto his face. Now little pink clouds were reflected in the sea.

On the dike to Schellingwoude we ran into a Reformed-looking gentleman; his white face was clean-shaven, he was wearing a black tailcoat, but he had his hat in his hand and his overcoat draped over his arm and he was whistling. It was November 22. We liked him and wanted to shake his hand but were worried he wouldn't understand us and his face was so terribly white.

At four o'clock the sun was very low in the sky, big and red, and it sank cold and dull behind a shed on the Amsterdam harbor. Loneliness crept up out of the marshland past the dike, to the east; at the end of the dike lay a pool lined with brown reeds—abandonment itself.

In the distance, on the Outer IJ dike, was a baker's wagon being pulled behind a white horse, and

we thought about the raisin bread inside it, since it was Saturday. And in one lonely house a single tea light was burning on the table, right next to the window with little tulle curtains pulled back to both sides. The teapot sat on the tea light, and our hearts completely melted, we would conquer the world some other time, for now we were thinking more about having something to eat and drink, bread and coffee, because it was getting cold, and about the floor sprinkled with white sand and the stove in the little café in Schellingwoude.

We sat quietly by the window in the café. I looked out to the east along the dike, at the couple of scrawny, windswept trees at the water's edge, at the water, and the sky turning darker. And then Hoyer, sitting across from me, said, "Look at that sky."

To the southwest the whole sky was yellow. And I turned to sit sideways on my chair and look, and I saw that it was good, everything was good as it was and there was nothing left to conquer, and I was alive.

When we walked along the dike between Schellingwoude and Nieuwendam with the IJ harbor on our left and the endless fields on our right, the water was blazing yellow all the way to the city; on the other side, the ditches ran off into the countryside and were tinged with pink, so lightly that at first I thought it must be from my eyes having looked into the sun so much.

And at the end of the fields you could still just make out the Zuiderzee dike. The countryside was so melancholy in the November twilight, with the square Ransdorp church tower in the distance and the rows of tiny houses on either side taking leave of the day as reluctantly as if there would never be any light again after this twilight. It would be like that when we died, just a little while then everything would be over, and we were very sad. But Bavink said that he still had one or two things he wanted to do. The yellow in the water had turned to pink. A ways farther, there was a plot of farmland outside the dike, and down in front, on the dike, was a short row of trees, behind it the rich plowed soil, black and glimmering. And then we thought of the spring to come, after this winter, and we felt immortal again and not the least bit sad, not anymore.

2. On Retreat

In late fall the following year, Bavink and Hoyer rented a little abandoned house in Schellingwoude on the Outer IJ dike. The plane tree in the garden behind Bekker's office was down to its last leaves.

It was quite an uncomfortable place they had found. In front, the water; behind, endless pale-green soggy fields with nothing in them and the stumpy Ransdorp tower in the distance with the shivering houses huddled around it.

A couple of scrawny, windswept trees, black and bare, lived their poor little tree-lives on the outermost edge of the dike in front of their house.

Everything looked like it was just waiting to be flooded, but the dike was strong. It only broke a few years later, and somewhere else. [\[1\]](#)

The house was always drafty and they took turns sleeping with Hoyer's overcoat on. And you couldn't buy anything on credit in Schellingwoude.

On Saturday afternoons, Bekker and I went out there, an hour and a half walk from Bekker's office. We usually had to bring something, a box of cigars or a flask of liquor, or brushes or paint or something else you couldn't get in Schellingwoude.

Bekker always brought some book or another with him, and newspapers, but mostly the Schellingwoude doctor read them. Bavink and Hoyer took a glance but only cared about the pictures

in *Simplicissimus* and *Le Rire*.

For months they never left the village. Bavink, numb with cold, sat down by the sluice and painted; Hoyer, with mad idealism, walked for hours in the mist along the winding sea dike, to Uitdam and beyond, and never complained when there was nothing to drink, and loaned Bavink his light coat, and didn't notice when his feet got soaking wet. In the morning he sat on the edge of his bed and rubbed the dried mud out of his socks and was content. Hoyer lived like a saint—a sketching, painting saint.

For weeks he was blue with cold, whole days went by when he hardly spoke a word since there was no one to say anything to, Bavink painted or slept, and still Hoyer never complained, he didn't long for Kalverstraat in the city, or his bar, or girls.

Bekker was convinced it wouldn't be much longer now before we astounded the world.

It was over with Lien, she had moved up in the world. One time, on a sunny afternoon in February, she came over on the little ferry. A childlike February sun was shining. She had on expensive clothes and a hat with a yellow-gold feather that cost more money than Bavink had ever gotten for one of his "little things." Bavink was sitting down on the dike, on the pilings, painting; the saint squatted next to him, right on the water, scrubbing the grease from a pan with a stone in the brackish water of the Outer IJ, they were not too particular.

The moment they saw Lien they decided to take the afternoon off. Bavink had been wrestling with the Outer IJ for three months and had just about had enough. And there was Lien, sitting in the middle of the room on their only chair and looking first out the window on one side at the fields and then out the window on the other side at the scrawny trees and the light blue water, and in the sun like that the world really did look quite nice. And Bavink and Hoyer sat on the floor with their backs against the wall and smoked clay pipes and looked up, full of quiet contentment, at Lien and Lien said there was a draft.

Hoyer said he'd never noticed anything—Hoyer, who used to never sit on a stone curb because it was too cold!

Then Hoyer went out and took Lien's purse and Bavink just looked and admired and continued to say nothing. Lien sat with one leg crossed over the other and she placed the tip of her umbrella in a crack between two boards on the bare floor and stretched out her arm and looked at the water and down from the water to the tips of her shoes and then up into Bavink's eyes. Then Bavink looked into her eyes and took his pipe out of his mouth and said: "Lien, you sure look pretty. If I had it to do over again ... and with those pretty clothes and everything, and that hat...."

Lien turned bright red and poked him with her umbrella, which almost made her fall off her chair. Then Hoyer came back with a half dram of old jenever and a beer bottle full of eggnog for Lien. Everyone was in a good mood till four o'clock. "Hey, Lien," Hoyer said, "do you know how to get the grease off a pan? I tried it with a pumice stone down on the dike but it didn't work."

"You need hot water, dummy."

"That's what I thought," Bavink said. "It was taking too long, I knew something was wrong."

Then Lien said they were hopeless and she took off her nice clothes, tied one of Bavink's coats around her waist, and went into the kitchen like that, in her slip, and washed the pan. And then she saw a stack of about thirteen dirty plates and two half-plates. She washed them all and wanted to throw out the half-plates but they wouldn't let her, why throw out a perfectly good half-plate?

The pan had never been cleaned. They usually only cooked rice in it anyway.

But at four o'clock the farm children got out of school and pressed their little farm noses against the windows so that all you could see were little white triangles all over and they wouldn't leave.

There were no curtains.

And when Bavink and Hoyer took Lien back to her ferryboat, at four thirty, there were two men standing at the crossroads by the sluice, and they said “Well, well,” and then looked as though they hadn’t seen Lien at all.

Not long after that, I ran into Bavink in the city. He had Hoyer’s overcoat on and smelled of bread. I thought that was strange. I asked if Lien had come back again and he shook his head no. He was resigned: “What can you expect when you’re broke. Hey, look at this.”

He unbuttoned the top button of Hoyer’s expensive coat to let me peek inside. “Bread, a fresh loaf of bread. I got it on credit in De Pijp. Hoyer’s out too, I’m supposed to meet him at Muiderpoort at three.”

In Schellingwoude they couldn’t even get bread anymore. Poor though I was myself, I gave them a cash advance on the Outer IJ. Oh, it would work out fine with the money, Bavink’s share of the world we were going to conquer was large enough. I was financing an empire. Empire? I was giving him an advance on a whole universe.

Bavink shuffled down Kalverstraat with his collar up and a bulge under his coat and he was whistling the Marseillaise and he smelled of fresh bread.

July 1914

[\[1\]](#) A later addition.

LITTLE POET

The third year of the war.

*Bellum transit, amor manet.**

I

TWICE the God of the Netherlands shook his venerable head and twice his long venerable muttonchops slid back and forth across his vest.

It didn't add up. There must be a mistake somewhere. A poet with no hair, that was very strange. The God of the Netherlands hadn't cared much for poets for thirty years. You could no longer tell what to make of them. Respectable or disrespectable? Impossible to say.

"He said he was filled with me. That used to be a given."

God sighed. He'd have to talk it over with a real poet tomorrow. Maybe Potgieter. These days he had nothing but worries on his mind.

A girl was walking down there, on Leidsestraat. God looked down upon her with fatherly satisfaction. The girl was like hundreds of other girls that summer, all in white, silk blouse and short knit skirt and white stockings, delicate little ankles and flat white shoes, and she had lovely eyes like hundreds of other girls in Amsterdam. Eyes that looked like they knew something very special. They didn't like that. Our Dear Lord had never thought about it before. But now it bothered him. It had started with a line of poetry about "knowing eyes," then one of them said that it was all a trick, a pious trick of God's. That they didn't know anything, they just looked as though they knew, they couldn't help it. God had never thought about that before.

Now they had gotten him thinking about everything. And just when it was so important to stay focused. The Kaiser himself had said it again, just recently: "*Der Tüchtigkeit ist die Welt.*"*

But once you start puzzling over something it's not so easy to stop. Now that he was paying attention, he saw hundreds, thousands of those girls, each one different and every one the same. Sometimes he no longer knew if he had seen ten thousand girls or one girl ten thousand times. "God in Heaven, had *he* created all these girls? Or was it a trick of the devil, all those knowing eyes?"

Look, there goes the little poet. A handsome young man, you have to admit: thin, with a nicely shaved boyish face except for a pair of flying buttresses in front of his ears, and so suntanned. He greets someone, tilting his straw hat a fraction above his close-cut hair.

Bizarre—so little hair—but it definitely was a little poet because God couldn't figure him out, or Potgieter either. And Professor Volmer wanted nothing to do with him.

And he suffered terribly from those knowing eyes, more than any decent upstanding person would. The devil had him in his clutches. He was a weak little poet and they drove him insane. He was respectable out of weakness. Another strange thing that God had never thought about before—respectable was respectable, full stop. The little poet didn't know which one he should fall in love with, no sooner had he looked into one pair of knowing eyes than he saw another. He was so weak, so wonderfully weak. But after he saw the twenty-fifth girl he felt something strange in his brain. He had already spitefully kicked over a chair on the sidewalk while walking past a café. Because he knew perfectly well that they didn't know a thing, that they burst out in stupid giggles whenever he doffed his hat to them, or just stared at him, stinking of bourgeois-young-lady conceitedness. And still he

couldn't leave them alone. Then he had to flee somewhere where there were no women, and he raged against God and the devil too, and he said that he'd end up as a lunatic at this rate and sit slobbering for years with his mouth hanging open wearing a leather bib without even realizing it. But the next day he would look *again*, and think: "*Mon âme prend son élan vers l'infini.*"*

Potgieter said that the guy was crazy and that back in Piet Hein's day....

The little poet took his course through the wastelands of Amsterdam, poetizing all the way. Nothing but Dutch people as far as the eye could see. Again he greeted someone, a gentleman in a top hat and tails straight out of an Eduard Verkade play. They spoke briefly, there on the square in front of Centraal Station.

On the ground floor God came strolling by in his yellow Panama hat, with a silver-handled walking stick and a shabby coat of an indefinable brown color draped loosely across his back, dandruff on his collar, his trousers too wide and too long and bunched on the tops of his shoes. You could see his muttonchops from behind and when he slowly climbed the two steps up to the station hall, the evening sun, low in the sky, glowed in God's polished left shoe.

"Who was that gentleman?" asked the little poet. "God," said the devil, and the knobby bumps on his forehead grew bigger. The little poet said nothing. "Your God, your boss's God and your father-in-law's God and your boss's accountant's God and the manager of the Nieuwe Karseboom's God. Your aunt's, the one who told you you had to doff your hat when you walked past your boss's house in Delft or Oldenzaal, or wherever it was, even if no one was there, because you never knew if someone might see. Your aunt who always makes your sister knit: 'An idle woman is the devil's plaything.' The God of all those people who say 'I never expected that from you' when you try to live a little, and who say 'I thought so, that was bound to end badly' when you end up in the poorhouse later. The God who resents that you have Saturday afternoons off, the God of Professor Volmer, lecturer in accounting and business, who thinks you spend too much time looking up at the sky. The God of everyone who has no other option besides work or boredom. The God of the Netherlands, of all of the Netherlands, from Surhuis moor down to Spekholz heath, the patron and benefactor of the League of Heads of Large Families and of the Association for the Reclamation of Fallen Women. They call it falling. I'm fallen too."

"It's not a very accurate metaphor, you're right," the little poet said absently.

He had been looking all this time at a lady who was standing there waiting. At the wonderful sharp edges of the tendons on her ankles, right above her flat white shoes. Of course she was wearing white flats with a short skirt and stockings with a terribly open weave so that her white legs shimmered through. "Now's not a bad time to fall," the little poet thought.

"*Mon âme prend son élan vers l'infini*," said the devil with an ironic smile, the way he had smiled for all eternity.

Then the little poet saw the square in front of the station again, and saw the devil, and heard what he had said.

"Devil," he said, "don't try to trick me."

The devil just shrugged his shoulders and looked at the station clock. Ten past seven. He held his hand over his mouth and yawned. Eternity wasn't going anywhere. And the fact is, he knew all too many little poets already. Why bother giving such big speeches?

The little poet set off for home and looked up at the wheel with little wings on it, on the railing of the high railroad bridge over the west passage, the wheel on a little iron post that wants to fly and never leaves its place and can be seen from the distant places it never reaches, even the Torenslui, looking up the Singel. The blue sky was still so hopelessly far above it. Even the lampposts at either

end of the bridge hold their arc lights high above the little wheel. There's not much you can do if you're mounted on a little iron post on a railroad bridge. At best you can sit there and think, and that doesn't get you anywhere. The little poet thought that it's better to be a wheel on a post than a little poet. The wheel is made of iron, a little poet isn't.

Meanwhile God sat by himself in a first-class compartment on the train to Delft and stared out the window and saw nothing. He had never been much for sightseeing. He held a report in his hand and files lay next to him on the seat.

The God of the Netherlands thought. These were strange times. God started reading again:

"Man's fate is to feel regret when he fails to reach his goal and to feel regret when he succeeds.

"There is no consolation in virtue and no consolation in sin.

"Therefore, cheerfully renounce all expectations. Place your hope in eternity: there is no awakening from this dream."

These were *truly* strange times. It couldn't end well. And now he'd gone and said that a new age had dawned. The age of Ironie Dilettantism was over, a new age of Trailblazing Optimism and Dynamic Vigor had begun. That's what he'd gone and said. And then, with a sigh, God turned back to the manuscript of a thick book about Taylor's Principles of Scientific Management and started reading.

II

The little poet had never fallen.

To be a great poet, and then to fall: When the little poet thought about what he actually wanted most of all, it was that. To astound the world, just once, and to have just once an affair with a poetess. He thought this thought again and again, for years, he was so naïve.

The little poet was respectably married to an adorable, unaffected, lively young woman. Of course he had fallen in love right away, as soon as he started to see the world. Mornings he saw her while he was walking to the office and she to school; afternoons at a quarter past one, during "market hour" when the stock market was in session and he was allowed out of the office and she was coming out of the dairy where she ate her sandwiches with a glass of milk and sometimes a cream puff or a piece of apple pie with whipped cream. *Her* sandwiches.

And she was *so* mad at him for always standing there like that, he was simply ridiculous. The other girls called him "Mr. Right" because he wore a cape and had such beautiful black hair (he didn't wear it cut short back then), and they looked at him as they walked past, three of them arm in arm, just looked for a second and then giggled at each other, the two outer girls with their heads bent in toward the middle girl, who looked at the ground, giggling too. But *she* walked grandly past and never looked and told Mien Bus that he had come for her, for Mien, and then they all laughed because they knew better. She stamped her little seventeen-year-old schoolgirl foot on the ground. "For me? That creep?" and she threw back her head.

And he was unhappy. He counted the hours. At eleven at night he looked up at the sky. It was exactly halfway from one thirty in the afternoon to eight thirty in the morning. And he wrote poetry.

He composed poems imitating Heine, in Dutch and German, poems after Hélène Swarth and Kloos and Van Eeden.

How heavily tread the hours with pond'rous gait.

THE CRUSADERS
(this one in German)

Down below, the Holy City
Lay outspread in all its glory.

That was *her*. Unfortunately the gates were shut tight. He wondered why he should go on living. And he rebelled against God.

My God, will my torments never find an end?

He couldn't bear to look at the people in his office; as soon as he arrived at a quarter past nine he felt like hitting someone. And then he would suddenly be transformed from gloomy to ecstatic. And he wrote more poems.

My sacred love ...

Now is the world an endless land of summer ...

God throws open the gates of Heaven,
My love sits there on a throne of gold.

This went on for eleven months or so. Then came three months when he had a job in a provincial town where they still today talk about what a crazy guy that was.

Then he got her. He was nineteen years old. He wrote her a letter saying that he would be in Amsterdam for two days and he would very much like to speak with her. They knew each other's names, Amsterdam really is just a village. She had missed him a lot in those hundred days and she came. Her mother didn't object: "as long as he's nice with a good job and she likes him ... but no fooling around!" She came to Muiderpoort one evening and he could see that she definitely knew what he wanted to ask her. It was so strange, so ordinary, he was utterly unable to poetize. And of course she said she didn't understand, but they walked together up Sarphatistraat anyway. The conversation was halting, what did they have to say to each other, they hardly knew each other yet. He had imagined that he would speak wonders, that the words would hurtle out of him like the broad Waal River rushing past the boats on the pontoon jetty at Nijmegen.

But they talked about his job in the other town and about her parents. And they said goodbye in front of her house and he gave her a kiss, all the way on the left side of her forehead. And she was *so* pleased, she had a boyfriend, and so handsome, what *would* Lou say. Too bad he lived out of town. So annoying, especially on Sunday afternoons when he didn't come see her so she had to stay at home.

The second evening he was allowed to come upstairs. Things had to move fast because he only had two days off.

His father had paid her father a visit and now he was allowed to come upstairs. Her father was sitting there, and his, and her mother and grandmother and an aunt. Her two little sisters had been sent to bed early. And then he got her, and the aunt said afterwards, "What a nice young man."

The next Sunday afternoon, they went to his house, of course, and a hunchbacked woman happened to be there, a cousin, wearing trousers and a lorgnette and drinking beer. Coba was as sweet as can be to her future mother-in-law and her future mother-in-law was as sweet as can be to her.

“What a cute bag you have. Is it from City?” “No, from Liberty.” “I see a lot of those bags with the little pouch on the top these days.” “To tell you the truth I don’t like that kind of bag very much.” “Yes, well, to each his own. Our Riek has one and I quite like it.” He sat there with them and didn’t understand a thing. Was *he* the same person who had walked the streets at night and said that God had thrown open the gates of Heaven? Strange.

But she was very adorable and unaffected and lively and young and did *not* kiss him on the forehead but right on his lips and his neck, in the hall, before they went into the room. She had to stand on her tiptoes and put her hands on his shoulders to do it. And she began to love him very much and he loved her very much too and hugged her close.

The situation remained mysterious to him, though, and he didn’t write any more poetry until after he was married.

And now they had been married for six years and had a child, an adorable five-year-old girl all the aunts liked to cuddle. She had a little money and he had a little money and he’d found a job in Amsterdam that he wasn’t half bad at, in his opinion, and they were more or less happy.

But since he was a true little poet something *had* to be missing. What is anything that a little poet actually has *ever* worth to him? That he just has, day in and day out. All those days. And forever is a terribly long time to be married. And a very adorable, unaffected, and lively young woman who loves her husband and copies out his manuscripts in nice handwriting but has slept next to him for two thousand nights already and knows that he can’t stand a drafty room and can’t get out of bed in the morning and can’t ever leave any jam uneaten in the jar—if he is a poet, a woman like that is truly something fit for the devil.

III

A great poet, and then to fall. But nothing ever came of that, because if you’re a little poet the prettiest girls are always walking on the other side of the canal. And so his whole life turned into one long poem, and that can be tedious too.

He was sitting in a streetcar, quietly poetizing away, sitting and staring, with his hands on the knob of his walking stick and thinking all the while, as little poets are wont to do, that he had such nice, pale, delicate, thin hands. It was around six o’clock on a Sunday evening in November, the streets were dark and empty. A lady, twenty-six or so, stepped onto the streetcar, stately, tall, in a brown suit with a stand-up collar, the cuffs and hems trimmed with black fur and her hands in a large matching muff, made of the same brown fabric with the same fur trim, and her delicate little face under a small brown hat with black fur. The whole ensemble was textbook Line Two, Museum District.

The little poet looked up for a moment, straight into her eyes, but she saw only the empty seat in the corner and walked right past him, tall and stately. Her husband followed behind her, clean-shaven, in black, with a tall hat on his graying, short hair.

When she sat down the little poet couldn’t see her, because he was sitting on the same side, farther forward, with four people between them.

Monsieur sat directly across from her, as was proper, and looked at his watch and said something.

The time, obviously. Then they said nothing more. No question about it, they were married.

The little poet decided they must have gone out for a visit and were now on their way home for dinner. Did they have a child, or children? Did her husband behave as was proper in the bedroom too? God let it happen: the little poet saw the man clear as day in front of him there on the streetcar, in nothing but a shirt and socks—a flannel shirt, of course, yes, gray flannel, not pretty and white—in his forties he must be, with weird hairs sticking up on his bare legs, and his tall derby hat on. Too bad he didn't wear glasses. And he heard the man ask in his proper Museum District voice, "Shall I leave the light on, Clara?" Her name, after all, must be Clara, the dazzling. And the little poet thought that Monsieur would say "Excuse me!" to her at a certain moment. Yes, God lets a person's thoughts wander so bizarrely. Strange, outlandish passages turn up in never-ending poems like his.

Then the little poet looked up at the window across from him in the streetcar. The houses were all dark, and the ladies reading this know perfectly well that in such circumstances you see all the passengers in the streetcar reflected in the window, outside.

The contemplative eyes of the little poet then looked straight into the contemplative eyes of Clara, the dazzling, which looked as though they knew something very special, but that was just an illusion. For a moment, the four contemplative eyes grew bigger and more dazzling, then the little poet lost his nerve, he was a well-behaved young man after all, even if there were such strange meanderings in his never-ending poem, and he looked at the brown fabric and black fur and at the vague shape of her legs under her suit and then wrenched his gaze toward a dairy outside. The curtains were drawn, it was Sunday. You can always look through people's reflections if you want, and P. C. Hooftstraat has really come down in the world, in the past there would never have been a milkman there, now there's even a greengrocer.

But when he looked back at how one of her hairs had come loose and was hanging down over her left temple, so lovely, so softly wavy, their eyes met again, for a moment. "I think you're handsome, do you think I'm pretty?" "I want you, if I had the courage, do you want me too, if you had the courage?" "I want to live, really live for once, be free, be a Goddess and not a lady from the Museum District, not so-and-so's daughter, so-and-so's sister, so-and-so's wife, so-and-so's mother, Mrs. So-and-so's friend. Just for a little while, in my thoughts. My thoughts go out to you, through my eyes, my thoughts range far and wide, forwards and backwards in time, through all veils and coverings. No one can stop them, no one can harm them, they go out to you through my eyes."

And *his* thoughts went out to *her* like that too, through his eyes into hers, in those few short seconds. And no one knew.

A tall tower surged up from his spirit and a tall tower surged up from hers. And they looked out far and wide over everything and saw only each other.

And so the little poet poetized away at his never-ending poem and even the silliest woman could poetize along with him. But they couldn't be together. And maybe that was what made it so beautiful.

At Hobbemastraat her husband glanced at the conductor and his hand went straight to the cord. And she stood up and walked through the streetcar, behind her husband, proper and stately and without seeing anyone.

But while Monsieur stepped off the tram and she had to wait on the step in front of the door, her left shoulder towards the little poet, and it was almost over, she vanquished the Museum District for just one infinitesimal moment and looked.

"I think you're handsome and you think I'm pretty too. My heart sings in my breast and my brain sings beneath my hair. Pretty hair, hmm?" The little poet kept poetizing his poem, without end. But the poem took a somber turn and Amsterdam was dark and empty.

Like a true ridiculous little poet he wandered around the Museum District on a few afternoons after that, always feeling terribly poor and never quite sure if his tie was tied straight and his collar was clean and if he looked polished enough in general. But he never saw her again, of course, maybe she didn't even live in Amsterdam. There was a house on the corner, surrounded by a small garden, and growing against the wall was a climbing vine that bloomed without leaves in the soft November air, flowering in little yellow stars. He decided that this was the house where she lived and he named the vine "Clara."

Still, he did love his wife and his wife loved him very much and they gave each other everything they wanted.

Why did God ever make *anyone* a little poet?

IV

The devil always has a good time with adorable, unaffected young women who love their lawfully wedded husbands very much. When they've been married for a year or so they start to feel a strange homesickness for a land they know. But they've never been there. How can they miss something they don't know? How can you know something you don't actually know? Strange. What do they long for? They fling open the balcony doors one spring morning, singing, and suddenly feel vaguely sad, and why? *C'est là, c'est là qu'il faut être. Là?** Where? "I'm crazy." And they hug their child tight and kiss it all over.

Coba is sitting at an outdoor table at the Beursbengel café on the Damrak, one of those tables with a heavy round marble top and a copper band around the edge. Her little girl is sitting across from her and the girl's bare little legs in low white socks dangle off of the chair. She has a piece of pie and a glass of milk and is eating with her little fingers. Her adorable eyes are so big and look around at everything. The child is awed by the special treat and all the people, but is very lively and cheerful. Mama looks to make sure she isn't making a mess and gently helps her but doesn't say much.

In the corner sits the devil, twisting the ends of his mustache. I once heard a woman, a high-minded, principled woman, say: "A man like that, what does he take me for? Does he think I'll fall in love with him just because he tugs at a wisp of hair? Bah!" Don't trust this woman too much. Now she's lying awake at night clenching her wet pillow in her teeth.

Coba takes off her jacket and lays it across her knees; it's too warm out for a blue twill suit. She is wearing a white blouse and her arms show through it, so pinkish brown, and the very top of her back and her chest too. You can see where her undershirt ends and that it's hanging from her shoulders on lace ribbons. Now she sucks in her upper lip, sticks out her lower jaw, and smoothes down her hair with her right hand, she turns her head a little and the tip of her tongue appears, brushes along her upper lip, and quickly disappears again. The devil twists his mustache. Now she says something sweet to her little girl and laughs, showing all her teeth; she has a good set of teeth—strong, even, dazzling white—so that you want to hold out your hand for her to bite, on the outside between pinkie and wrist. It is early May. For the first time this year she is wearing a V-neck blouse and her chest is white, so intensely white that the devil cannot help but think of heavenly light. And her collarbones stand out so perkily next to the indentation in her neck. She brushes the edge of her blouse with her slender fingers. Now she wipes the dessert off her child's hands with her lace-fringed handkerchief. She takes her child's little hand in her own two hands and squeezes it and gives the child a kiss on her big eyes and the child asks, "Mommy, why did you do that?" And she blushes and asks, "Do what,

Bobi?" "Why did you suddenly kiss me?" "But Mommy kisses you like that all the time, doesn't she? Do you want another piece of pie, honey? But you can't make such a big mess, okay? Should Mommy go choose one for you? Stay right here, okay?" And Mommy goes inside, her hips just barely swaying, her blue twill skirt swinging back and forth. Then she comes back out holding a plate and laughs at her little girl from the doorway and sits back down. The devil twists the ends of his mustache. And suddenly she is afraid. What if he says something to her? What should she do? "Come on, Bobi, finish up, wait, should I help you?" And she picks up half the piece of pie on the tines of her fork and sticks it in the girl's mouth. She feels the fat lady next to her looking. The child has a face full of whipped cream. "Bah, what a messy girl!" "But Mama, you did it!" And there's Papa. He says hello and doffs his hat to the devil and the devil doffs his hat to Papa. Mommy blushes again, this time down to the indentation in her neck, but the little poet doesn't see it. He's been married too long.

She stands up and helps the child from her chair. "You want to leave right now?" "I have to go buy some wool to finish knitting my sweater. I can't find the color anywhere. I've already been to four stores and then I thought I should come here first, it was getting late." The little child's eyes open very wide and she looks up at Mommy. "All right, we can go. Did you pay? Waiter!" The little poet doffs, the devil doffs, Mommy nods stiffly. Bobi waves her little hand and says in a high-pitched little voice, "Goodbye, mister." The devil nods and smiles and winks. "Mommy, that man was looking at you the whole time."

Luckily the little poet didn't hear a thing, his poem without end has once again reached a stage that is driving him out of his mind. He sees all the women sitting at the outdoor tables and walks past them to the street. "Oh God," he thinks, "what if you performed a miracle now, what if all their clothes suddenly fell off?" A nearly mad little poet thinks the strangest things. You and I, dear reader, never think such things. And my lady readers.... Mercy me, perish the thought.

V

Six years they'd been married. And while she sliced the bread every morning and spread the butter and poured tea, for him and for Bobi and for the maid, and sometimes for the cleaning lady... *You* try slicing bread and making sandwiches for four kids just once, if you're not used to it, the way the unfortunate writer of these pages has done on occasion, it'll drive you insane. Over time you'd probably get used to it, but dear God, over time it would also get horrifically boring if you were unfortunate enough to think about it.

All right, so, while she was doing these things over and over again, it pleased God—the true God, God of heaven and earth—to make Dora, her sister, grow up and turn into a woman, beautiful as a racehorse. She was one of the two little sisters who had been sent to bed early on the evening he was allowed to come upstairs for the first time.

It took a long time before he saw her. But *she* had seen *him* long before. It was when she was fifteen. He was recently married, just over a year, and he came back from a trip where he'd gotten a lot of sun. He was wearing a light gray suit and brown shoes and a white hat with the brim folded down all the way around. Back then they still threw stones at you on Reinwardtstraat if the brim of your hat was folded down all the way around, but now it's allowed. His in-laws lived in the country then, somewhere along the IJssel River in a white house with a sunroom and a porch along the second floor. She was still barely more than a child, her skirt came down halfway between her knees and her ankles. Now grown women walk around like that. She was wearing a sundress with straps over her

shoulders, wide vertical red stripes with thin white stripes between them; the shoulder straps were just red. Under this high-cut dress she had on a white blouse with a stiff raised collar. And her face was tanned too. She wore her dark hair with a part and loose in the back with a black bow. She was bareheaded and playing on the grass in front of the house like a child, playing diabolo, for the last time, though she didn't know it.

It was in early June, the tall trees behind and on either side of the house were a solid green mountain. Here and there a brown beech tree stood amid the green. The pink hawthorn was in bloom, the red flowers of the chestnut trees had fallen while the delicate empty calyxes left on the branches stood straight up. The acacias were in bloom, and the jasmine. The sunroom and all three porch doors were open wide. There was a little round pond in front of the house with leaves and white petals from the water lilies floating on it and reeds and yellow irises along the edge. The gravel road ran past the garden and on the other side of the road, flanking the garden on this side too, there was green rye everywhere as high as your head.

With raised arms spread wide she caught the spinning diabolo on the string, but it fell, and when she was about to bend down to pick it up she saw her sister's husband.

"Hi, Dora, don't you recognize me?"

He saw a child and a lawn and the pond and the white house and the tall trees and the acacia and jasmine in bloom to one side. He was recently married and hadn't yet started his poem without end. But she saw him, her eyes grew wide, the blood rushed upwards in her body. Why didn't she throw herself around her brother-in-law's neck and give him a kiss? She had always done that before, whenever he was a sweet brother-in-law who brought her bonbons and brooches and rum balls. The rum balls were their little secret.

"Hi E.," she said and held out her hand.

"Dora, how pretty you look, are your mom and dad home?" He wanted to pinch her cheek, the way he'd always done with "the children," but she ran off and burst into the house. "E.'s here."

The diabolo lay on the walkway and the sticks with the string were on the grass. He gathered them up and kissed his mother-in-law and vigorously shook the old man's hand. "Here, sis, your toy! Is Em still at boarding school?" And Mother-in-Law, who always liked very much to see people kissing decently and honorably, said, "Have the two of you said hello properly?" But Dora rushed out of the room with her toy and ran upstairs and stood in front of the open window in her room. Crazy, she was never out of breath and now she was panting and gasping. And she felt with her hands that her breasts were getting big. And the lawn in front of the house and the pond with the leaves and the white petals, with the reeds blowing gently back and forth, and the yellow lilies and to the left past the edge of the garden the blossoming acacias and the jasmine next to the rhododendron bush in bloom and the rye across the street, waving and shining in the sun, all these things looked so new and so beautiful. The larks were singing everywhere, a heron flew past, the sky was so high and the trees were rustling all around the house and the light—could you catch the light and hug it tight and take it inside you? She clasped her hands behind her head and felt her breasts pulled up. Then she stretched as far as she could. Arms high and spread wide, like when she was playing diabolo. And she felt the air penetrate down to the bottom of her lungs.

She calmly came downstairs singing the chorus from Handel's *Judas Maccabaeus*, "Day of light and Heaven's glow," which she had sung so many times without ever really thinking about it. Then she walked into the room and said "Hi, E.," and stood on her tiptoes and stretched up and gave him a kiss on the mouth, like before, like a sister. And he, who had just been having a conversation with his father-in-law about linseed oil—he was just back from his trip, the things a little poet has to do!—he

only said:

“How big you’ve grown, child! I don’t even need to pick you up anymore.”

And she loved him so much that she wasn’t even mad when he said that. Her breasts were already getting bigger, weren’t they? Just wait....

“Dora, the milk’s boiling. Maartje went into town.” And Dora flew to the kitchen to turn off the stove.

VI

Now before I go any farther I should probably mention that my manuscripts too are recopied by *my* wife, and that she does not see the poetry in this story. Coba’s flirting is not so terrible, she thinks, it’s because the little poet was neglecting her. The lady on the tram deserved a slap in the face and the little poet too. It’s strange, in other stories she reads she doesn’t think things along these lines are *that* bad. I think it’s because *I’m* the one who wrote this story. Of course she knows that there’s a difference between the author and Mr. Nescio himself, but to her that’s splitting hairs. It’s a difficult situation. My domestic bliss is somewhat troubled—but *still* I’ll keep going.

There’s the God of the Netherlands again, strolling across the Damrak’s burning-hot pavement. Again he’s wearing the same brownish suit and the same hat and has flakes of dandruff on his collar. This time he’s put a handkerchief over his collar, he’s sweating. He puts the tip of his walking stick down a long way from his body as he walks. His gray muttonchops stroll along with him.

God of heaven and earth, of land and sea, take this oppression from me, gather it up in your hand and carry it far away from the Damrak and lay it gently down on a garbage heap next to the blue pots with holes in the bottom and the crushed tin cans and rusty barrel hoops and ashes and shrimp shells. Somewhere I never go.

Now my spirit can abandon my damned self and rise straight up into the sky like blue smoke on a windless summer night, while a distant cow sorrowfully moos.

And now everything is gone that once was and I am Dora and I am in a new world, the same as the old world but seen from the feet of the Father, and I look down from there at Dora, who I myself am, a woman now, a girl, for as long as the state of grace lasts.

And just as the world itself is new for me, so too did it lie outspread and untouched and benevolent for Dora after that day. Oh, she accepted the miracle, but she didn’t understand it or understand herself, just as the earth doesn’t understand itself, the wheat grows out of it and is green and turns yellow and is mowed and the tall sheaves rest on the yellow wheat stubble and the earth knows nothing about it.

And her breasts *did* get bigger, they moved when she walked. But she was still a slender girl with the indentation in her neck clearly visible, and her tendons and the tips of her collarbones stood out clearly, just like on her sister. And when she turned her head to the side you could see a deep hollow in her shoulder, if she had on her loose boatneck blouse. In her tan face her eyes were so white and so blue, dark blue. I saw the Zuiderzee frozen over once, and it was the same white. But all the warmth of her young body shone out of the blue of her eyes, without it cooling her body down at all. And when she stood with her hands on the small of her back, square on her two legs with her feet a little ways apart, you saw the points of her shoulder blades and a hollow between them like a poem that drew your thoughts into the distance, like a river lying outstretched, far away, then winding onward, you can’t see the end of it. And when she tilted her head forward—she wore her hair up now—the

God of heaven and earth himself looked up for a moment from his eternal contemplation of the eternal lands and seas and propped his right elbow on his thigh and rested his head on his right hand, thumb under his chin and index finger along the length of his cheek, and he beheld the tan little bumps above the hollow that was a poem, and the fine hairs that glinted in the sunlight, and he smiled. Then he looked gravely back down past his feet at his Rhine winding back and forth between his mountains, and he mused: “What’s going on here? How did I let the Germans found another empire? Those Prussians....”

And his noble, hairless visage darkened. Two deep furrows appeared above his strong straight nose.

But *she* wasn’t thinking about any Prussians. She thought how sweet her sister’s husband was and that it was good that she loved her brother-in-law. He was her brother after all. And a poet. Coba had told her that. And a poet was someone dear to God’s heart. She had read that in a book somewhere.

She was old enough now to read edifying books, with chocolate in her mouth and the rest of the chocolate bar on the table.

If only she could write poetry too someday, or—a novel. A book about young love. Everybody was reading about young love back then. And one evening as she lay on the IJssel dike, her bicycle next to her on its side on the grass, with a blade of grass in her mouth that she turned around and around, looking out over the water at a tjalk’s sail clattering down along the mast and falling limp, she tried. But nothing much came of it. It made her feel all soft and weak inside, made her heart and her lungs feel so big and so melancholily full. She felt the evening landscape along the length of her spine, from top to bottom. The cows standing in the water and drinking and looking at each other, the rattling of the anchor chain, the light hung high on the mast of the ship—it all brought tears to her big eyes. But nothing came of it. She took the blade of grass in her mouth and split it lengthwise with her thumbnails but nothing came of it.

She stood up. The stars were shining in the pale sky, the water was rippling and swirling and turning and flowing as though there was no Dora standing in the colorless summer evening. A heavy wagon crunched laboriously over the gravel road in the distance. Melancholy rose up out of the darkening land; the water still held a little light.

Then she stretched out her arms but there was no one to answer her. Then she didn’t know if she wanted to live or die and she slowly rode her bike home, where Mother sat yawning over her *Daily News* under the gas lamp with her glasses on the tip of her nose. She looked hard at Dora, then took off her glasses, wiped them, felt for the top of the glasses case on the newspaper and bent down since the other half of the case had fallen on the floor. “Here, Mom.” Then Mom stood up, yawned, and folded the paper in half, looked at the little clock on the mantelpiece, and said, through another yawn, “Quarter past ten.”

Back in her room Dora took off her clothes and smelled the scent of her own clean warm body. And a great desire filled her again, the same way the evening landscape had filled her with a great desire, and the dark river that flowed out to a point that was light for a moment and then it turned and was gone. But what it was she desired, that she didn’t know.

She suddenly saw it all before her eyes again in the darkness of the room: the water with the ship at anchor and the light on the mast, the cows across the water, nearby. She saw that dusk didn’t fall, it crept up out of the land, it was the first time she had realized that. She especially saw the end of the river, flowing out to a point where there was a patch of greenish light in the water, where the riverbank curved round. And she heard the distant crunching of the heavy wagon on the gravel road.

“God, if only I could be dear to your heart,” she said childishly. And she had a dream that night.

She dreamt that E. was taking a walk with Coba in a meadow, she in white linen, he all in white flannel with the cuffs of his pants legs turned up and a flat straw hat on and brown shoes. She dreamt that they were smiling and laughing at each other, and he kissed her on the mouth, four kisses one after the other until she laughingly pulled free. And that she, Dora, ran up to her sister and threw her arms around her neck and lay her head on her shoulder and said: "Coba, how sweet you are." Then suddenly her mother was standing there, with her glasses up on her head now, and she said, "Thirteen minutes to two."

VII

Meanwhile our well-loved little poet calmly wended his way along the road to the grave like a good little citizen and the traffic on the Damrak and on the Rokin and all throughout Amsterdam took its course as though he didn't matter in the least.

He was promoted at the office and inherited a little money and gradually started buying his clothes and shoes from different stores. That was when he bought that white flannel suit. He took to smoking four-cent cigars instead of two-and-a-half-cent cigars, he had a box of them at home, and he wore nice shirts and stopped wearing those thick wool socks, washed his hands before and after each meal, and spent a few guilders every week in cafés, both alone and with his wife. He took pleasure in his tobacconist's polite greeting and the respectful cordiality of the conductor on Line Two. He had started working harder at the office over the years, started to get better at it, and it even sometimes happened that he went back after dinner and worked late though his boss never asked them to. His concierge held him in higher and higher esteem, and considered him a very educated man. Even his aunt from Delft or Oldenzaal began to respect him and nodded benevolently when Coba told her about how her nephew was getting ahead. He never talked about it himself. He had subscriptions to the *The People* and the *Handelsblad* and the *Groene* by that point and was a member of the Party and of the Dutch General Union of Mercantile and Industrial Workers. He never attended meetings but when they came to see him and asked him to sign a petition in support of a strike or to contribute an hour's wages to the Party he offered them a cigar and Coba poured them a cup of tea and he had a chat with them without talking down to them in the slightest and pledged one or two rijksdollars and walked them to the front stairs and even held the door for them. He himself was just a salaried worker, and as a young man he too had worn taps to make his shoes last longer, and a very long time ago he had lived in a building where the neighbors always left their front door open and he'd sat down to a plate of rice for dinner, before his father had found that job that paid so well.

And when he got another raise they ate soup every day from then on, and Coba bought three silver napkin rings, one for Bobi too, and from then on she didn't want to pack lunch anymore when they went for a Sunday walk in the country, the way she always used to.

Their friends had moved up in the world too: Bonger, the doctor, and Graafland, who was head clerk in the Postal Service and had given up writing books, and van der Meer, who sold cars and wanted nothing to do with poetry. The ones who hadn't moved up in the world they never saw anymore. There was Kool, for instance, who always scarfed down his sandwiches and who had schemed to reform the world for so long that he ended up shipped out to the colonies, God knows where. They wrote to each other at first, but that stopped after a while, they ran out of things to write about. He had run into Hein again a while ago, who was determined to be a painter. He painted the inner essence of things' souls but that didn't bring in any money and after his father died he was flat

broke. The little poet hadn't seen him for years.

One day he was walking down Pieter Vlamingsstraat and saw him, dressed like an undertaker: Hein, who had shown a painting at a gallery once, called *Portrait of a Young Tubercular Syphilitic* (in French no less) and "theosophical in conception." They were burying a local grocer. The men in black stood on the sidewalk holding umbrellas. Hein too. It was drizzly. He had a mourning hat on his head, a top hat, crooked, too small. His formal mourning coat with knotted cords was buttoned up tight, it was much too small for him and was almost bursting open, it stretched over his rib cage with ridiculous creases everywhere. "My goodness," Hein said, "what a fine fellow you've turned into." Right then, thank God, they carried the dead grocer out of his house. It's not so easy to move up in the world, even if you know deep down that you're still a little poet. In any case, he didn't like walking around in that neighborhood very much and after that day he never wanted to set foot there again. And then you sometimes had to let yourself be taken out to eat, and be handed a menu you couldn't make heads or tails of, not a single line. During the first course you take too much of everything since you don't know what's coming next or how far along you are, and then you try to do better in the next course and end up with too little of everything, and then you have to smoke a big heavy cigar on an empty stomach. That's when you wish your father had just gotten you a job in the sanitation department where you could walk around on a quiet, sunny canal street in the morning in a blue smock, with a garbageman's rattle and a shiny leather cap with a brass number on it, rattling your rattle without thinking about it, in thick double-soled shoes.

And twenty-eight years farther on down the road to the grave he saw his father's gray head. He had always done well too and had not accomplished anything special either. He saw himself with exactly the same head having trudged along for another twenty-eight years and felt like he was his own father. And twenty-three years behind him trudged his daughter, still just a little girl. Bobi wouldn't get anywhere in the next twenty-three years either and yet she would walk the same road he was walking, the same and yet different. It was an absolutely meaningless procession, the little poet thought. It weighed on his soul.

But inside this harmless, proper, bourgeois young gentleman there still lived something that wasn't a gentleman but a person, someone who didn't want to just die, who wanted to build a tower of his own that reached up into the blue sky and would stand forever. And who was a wild animal too, who wanted to devour all the indifferent creatures, living and dead, who acted like he wasn't there, and wanted to keep devouring and devouring until it was all wolfed down and he was the only thing left with nothingness.

But he didn't know how to start, so nothing ever came of it. He never got any farther than having a poem accepted in a magazine now and then. The *Handelsblad* praised him, but they praise so many people; Professor Scharten, thank heavens, called him "very promising"; his friends, who had turned into serious men, said an appreciative word or two about it when they saw him, but they no longer got very worked up about anything. And slowly the issues of the magazines began to crumble away, just like the little poet's life, and other than that nothing happened. The people in the office didn't read any magazines but he wrote under a pen name anyway.

One time, on a pleasure cruise, he saw a young couple, fiancés, sitting and looking at the water—the boy had his right arm around the girl's shoulder and held her right wrist tight and she had put her left hand on his right hand and they sat like that, pressed close together. The little poet looked at them, it's so lovely to see a nice young couple like that. That these children are excited because they want more, that they are only getting each other worked up for what they can't do and don't dare to do, that they never know where to stop—no one ever notices that or thinks about that. It was very lovely, and

maybe the truth was that they had just recently gotten engaged and were still satisfied with being madly in love with each other. Then they looked at each other and he said:

I look aslant into the pools of your eyes
And see a blue and golden spark

and he kissed her on the lips. She blushed: “That man is watching.”

That was the only time in his life that the little poet ever felt his own life being lived in someone else’s head, and he was even more embarrassed than the girl and blushed too and gave a quarter to the man who came around collecting money for the musicians.

After that there was no one, among the dead or among the living, who showed that they had any idea of what the little poet felt in that poet’s head he was dragging around with him to his inglorious grave.

The little poet had had enough. He had one good thing left:

My dead heart is so hard to bear ...

But he threw it into the kitchen stove. There was no fire in the fireplace since it was summer.

And then he got so enraged at everything, living and dead, that he interrupted his endless eroticism and wrote a grim and bitter little book that made him famous right away. But that happened later, we’ll get to that.

For the time being he only gritted his handsome teeth and then he said out loud, alone in his room, “To become a great poet and then to fall, dammit!” He had untied the laces of his shoes and he kicked one of them off with such violence that it startled the missus downstairs.

VIII

That was in the summer. By fall the little poet had gotten to the point that it was “impossible” to get away from the office. His aunt had reason to be pleased—her nephew was “terribly busy.” He spent three or four evenings a week at the office. He was supposed to spend a week with her, in Velp (she was living in retirement at the time, having sold the family business), but he couldn’t get away, just like a real businessman.

On Sundays he read the mail, anything so as not to have to think. When visitors dropped by, Coba would say, “I think from Shanghai. Shanghai, isn’t it, Eduard?” And Auntie could already see in her mind’s eye an announcement saying that “our esteemed colleague of many years is hereby, as of 1 January”—that was a bit quick—“as of 1 July, a member of our board of directors.”

But it didn’t turn out that way.

His father-in-law was dead. Dad had always wanted to live in the country and for four years he raised chickens and fed the peacock and planted fruit trees, which died. And he kept the accounts. Eggs cost six cents each in the village store while theirs cost them eight cents each, but when he walked into his kitchen with a half dozen eggs and wiped his feet on the mat, he felt that for twelve cents extra you *do* get something.

And Mom went along with it, she shared his new life as much as she could and didn’t let anything show, just like good old-fashioned moms from the old days. At night, alone by the lamp, she gazed at

the paper over her glasses and thought about Linnaeusstraat in Amsterdam. *She* could never go to bed at nine. She used to see the streetcars moving across the square down by Mauritskade in the evening when she looked out from her upstairs apartment, see the lights gliding by. And the trees in the Muiderbosch, waving back and forth against the dark sky, bare of leaves, full of crows' black nests. That's when you really longed for summers in the country. And she thought about the shops on Saturday evening and the crowds shopping and how she herself used to walk down Van Swindenstraat with her shopping basket under her apron back when they weren't doing so well.

You could really talk to people back then. Yes, oh, and Dapperstraat market with the two rows of carts, produce and fish and cheese and cups and saucers, and smoky oil lamps and serene white gaslight from homemade gas in little globes. People jostling and hurrying everywhere. After they had been posh a long time she still went on Saturday evenings to buy smoked eels from the cart with the tall black poles sticking up with the jaunty copper knobs on top. Until a girl in a big multicolored skirt and short hair with no hat on said, "Jeezus, the millionaires're out buyin' eels." A tramp like that, with brown shoes on.

And then Mom began to drift off, in the whispering silence, and sat nodding off with her glasses in her right hand until she bent too far forward and woke herself up with a start. "Oh! I thought I heard the streetcar bell ..."

Meanwhile, up in her bedroom, Dora was writing a short story about "Him" in a ten-cent schoolbook and she told herself that He was someone she didn't know, someone still to come. And the notebook was shoved away into the back of a drawer that no one could get to, and she blushed even though she was alone and no one knew anything about it.

Em was engaged to a bookkeeper in Amsterdam and talked about her house, which they hadn't found yet. She was thinking about having a baby. Weird, a boyfriend like that, who said "insofar as that is concerned" and "alternatively," and stood with a sharp crease in his black worsted wool pants next to the henhouse, and always had something to say to Dad about "the Bovenkerks," Mr. Bovenkerk the coal merchant and Mrs. Bovenkerk who summered in Zandvoort at the Mon Désir and Bovenkerk Junior who was about to take his final exams. And so on. Em got very angry when Dora once said, "Look, it's the Bovenkerk." She'd answered "Go make love to the IJsseldijk" and almost added "you old prune"—Dora was one year older—but luckily her upbringing kept the upper hand. Dora turned bright red but said nothing. "Could she have read one of my notebooks? But I never leave them lying around!" Yuck, what a brother-in-law. And when he wore that white sweater! And those eyes! A real gentleman, the kind who never looked at anything while he walked down the street except to see if someone he knew was coming in the other direction. And so spineless. How could Em stand a man like that! *She* would rather stand against a pine tree. No, Coba had done much better. A husband like an ocean! And suddenly she had a vision of white sand and sun and sea and surf and red and blue swimsuits and white dresses and white and red parasols. And of dunes with hollowed-out sides, with tufts of grass on top bowed down by the wind. And of a wave that knocked her down in the water. She could taste the salt.

Now Dad was dead and they were moving. Mom was planning to live back on Linnaeusstraat, across from Oosterpark. Em was going to get married the following year and Dora had to get a job. Just helping around the house and staying with people here and there and not actually doing anything only makes you restless. First she was planning to go visit a friend in Berg en Dal for a few weeks, to recover a little from the unpleasantness of the past few weeks, and then she'd be ready to join her mother in Amsterdam.

E. would bring her. It wasn't easy to get another day off from the office but he would have to just

do it.

Dora looked at him—how strangely he was talking!

In the train they were polite and obliging to each other but said very little. They rode over the IJssel and the Rhine and Dora looked out at the rivers with her big quiet eyes, sitting straight up in her black dress, hands in her lap, until she could no longer see them and still she sat there and looked out.

And he glanced at her face now and then and then back out the window so as not to bother her. Then he tried to see if he could picture her in his mind, bit by bit at first, her forehead, and how her hair lay above it, slightly wavy, and her eyelids and her long dark lashes and then her black eyebrows up above, and then all that together with her eyes, especially her eyes, he saw them floating above the cornfields, and her nose just the least bit upturned, so delicate, and her mouth, the pursed red lips, and the little ears pink and translucent, visible through the hair hanging over them, and the stray hairs in front of them and her jaw, so noble and long, with a sharp little chin with a dimple in it. And then he couldn't keep himself from looking back at the two little vertical ridges under her nose.

He shut his eyes for a moment and saw her whole face clearly, her tan cheeks too now. And it was also visible perfectly clearly outside, in front of the row of poplars, which had only a very few leaves left on them. Since it was October already. He had to laugh at the people who thought he was a respectable, upstanding gentleman.

“Say, is it true you stay late at the office every day now?” He nodded. “Do you have to?” He shrugged. “Why do it then?” He laughed again. “To get ahead in the world. You don't get it for free.” Didn't sound like much fun to her. “What do you want to do, then?”

“Look at things ... and think ... and write ...” she said, with the slightest hint of a blush ...” at least if you can.”

He gave a nastily knowing smile. “Impossible, Dora. That won't get you anywhere. The dumb animals are better off. Don't you think Bovenkerk is a happy man?”

Her big eyes opened wide with quiet shock. “Oh, but to write what you think is so amazing—whoosh, whoosh, you don't even know how you're doing it and suddenly there it is, exactly the way it has to be. And when you read it later you're right back in your own earlier life again and yet you don't know if you're yourself or someone else.” Her eyes sparkled, there were tears in them. She wasn't blushing self-consciously anymore. She sat there with her head on her right hand and her elbow on the little shelf in front of the window and gazed out. And the little poet thought: “She's the real thing,” and: “Now they think I'm a respectable, upstanding gentleman.”

But he stayed bitter and knowing. “God carries us up to the heights only to hurl us back down again. The path over the summit is short but the valleys are long. Anyone who has been to the mountaintop spends the rest of his days in misery.”

She shook her girlish head slowly, so sweetly, and at the same time so thoughtfully. “I'll *always* live on the mountaintop.”

He wanted to say “Good!” but said nothing. She looked out at the Waal River. “Beautiful, huh?” And suddenly she stood up, took her hat off the rack, pinned it quickly in place, and, holding it with both hands, feet wide apart for balance, suddenly laughed a reckless laugh like a mischievous girl, her eyes locked with his: “No Bovenkerks for me!” Then she leaned her upper body out the window and looked toward Nijmegen spread across the hills along the river, so un-Dutch, so wanly romantic, house upon house and tree upon tree, and she sang into the wind and the clattering of the train over the bridge.

To be a great poet and then to fall. In the fullness of time.

It was *certainly* a day to forget about 36" white shirts and colored satin for a while.

There was no one there to pick them up. The friend couldn't leave the house since her mother was bedridden and they didn't have a maid. A maid is a sister, not yours or mine but a typesetter's or a mailman's, who crawls around rooms on her hands and knees wiping the floor and takes out the trash and breaks the teacups.

So Dora and the little poet had a cup of coffee in Lent, overlooking the river and with a view of the city and the hills. It had turned into a still, sunny autumn afternoon. The chestnut trees were already bare, their yellow five-fingered leaves with thick gummy stems lay on the ground and dry golden leaves lay everywhere. There was a smell of decaying leaves, which always made the little poet's heart flutter as if he was about to die and awaken, immortal, in just such a still blue and gold autumn day that would never end. He wiped a thread of gossamer from his forehead. The sky was so blue and cloudless and it looked down at itself in the water and the sun shone golden.

The city rose up out of the water into the blue sky, quay and houses and then more houses farther up, half visible or all visible above the houses lower down, with red roofs everywhere and over there an enormous church like a sign by which God could recognize his city. It had two sharp spires, tall and powerless, reaching up even higher. The way a little poet reaches up, powerful and powerless, from the raging river of his poethood toward God, who never does come out from behind the blue sky and show himself. The little poet had to laugh at the miracle before his eyes, the eyes that saw a monument to God's majesty where actually there was nothing but shacks full of measly small-town life, not even in civilized Holland but out east.

They looked straight down a street that ran steeply uphill from the quay. Shadows were starting to appear on the right side. And up on the hill was a terrace with an iron fence around the edge and over there, on another terrace, a washtub, and someone more than halfway from the river to God opened a window that fiercely reflected the bright sun for an instant.

To the left of the city was a low ridge of green hills in a straight line "*ins grosse Vaterland.*"*

A golden alley cut gently up across the slope. The golden letters of the French boarding school, "Notre Dame aux anges," shone far above in the distance, on a tall building at the foot of the hills, where the grassy plain ended. "Notre Dame aux anges," innocent naked little angels and innocent fully clothed students. The God of the Netherlands is right after all, you can never tell with poets. Are they respectable or disrespectable, decent or indecent?

Then the little poet recaptured the wan romance of the whole situation. God didn't mean anything by it. He was only playing around, only getting everything ready for a new production of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* if the little poet was up for it.

So they chatted and played with words and thoughts and flights of fancy and looked at the sparkling in each other's eyes whenever a new flash of inspiration struck. Then they stood up and crossed the river. She wanted him to have a nice present to take home to Coba that night, so they went to go buy it together. She hung on his arm, her left arm through his right and her little hands clasping each other tight in their black kid gloves.

A light-purple silk shawl with a knotted fringe—that's what he should buy, oh yes, Coba would be so happy with that. Come on, be a nice brother-in-law. She looked into his eyes and pressed his arm, for her sister. There was no duplicity in her head, there was blood rushing in her head but no duplicity. "Look, it's so pretty." They were standing in the valley and looking up at the hill, and the

arch of the bridge up there that led to the Belvédère framed a little picture: a stretch of gravel road, deserted, climbing gently, with the blue ribbon of a footpath on either side, and trees with blazing orange-yellow crowns, the branches clearly visible through the leaves, and a pair of streetlamps far apart with frosted glass globes, bright white— like a tinted engraving just waiting for someone to write “October 5” underneath.

There was no duplicity in her thoughts when she suddenly fell silent, the engraving having derailed their conversation. Even though she felt it herself. But she didn’t understand it, just as Adam and Eve didn’t understand their nakedness, or the “*anges*” of Notre Dame their angelic state, or the boarding-school students their fully-clothedness. My God, what is a woman who understands herself.

But he understood himself all right, it was horribly clear to him, and that is why nothing happened. He looked at her and the poet in him worshipped her and raised her up to the throne alongside the God of heaven and earth and he didn’t dare touch her.

And at the same time, deep inside the little poet, the wild animal crouched, ready to pounce and devour all the things that taunted him, everything that stood around him and walked past him and didn’t notice him. First of all, her—the beautiful, the beloved, first—so that there would be no reason not to devour everything else. To lift her up as high as the stars in the winter night and do his worst with her and then let her fall down into the unfathomable deeps. To avenge upon her, in his pleasure, the whole world’s taunting indifference. And besides, what would a little poetess want more than to fall like that?

Those were his thoughts while a little sparrow flew from a piece of horse dung on the gravel road up into one of the orange trees. But he said, “Do you know a nice shop around here?”

They bought a very beautiful shawl, elegant and fine. Too bad she was wearing black. She tried the same shawl on herself, but in black, to see how it looked, and her upper body bent the tiniest bit back as she tried it on. But the purple one, *that* was gorgeous. Coba would definitely squeal with pleasure.

And so on that day she was simultaneously and alternately sister and wife and little poetess and courtesan and she did not know her divided nature and did not understand any of it.

But what a day to end all days it was.

She sang out loud on the road to Beek, which was also deserted, and she skipped as she went, she couldn’t help it, she could move mountains around for fun and snatch the sun from the sky with one hand and toss it over her shoulder into the Waal just to hear it hiss.

The electric tram gathered them up and trailed a long stream of dry yellow leaves whirling and shuffling and rustling behind it, a little joke of God’s, one he could easily permit himself on a day like this.

From Beek they climbed to Berg en Dal, winding through the hills. And the hills were not nearly high or steep enough, how could you tire yourself out on those? And she had to tire herself out or else she would burst apart with power, shatter into fragments of little poetess and wife and sister and courtesan. At the summit they looked down into a little valley with black and yellow and green rectangular fields sloping up and down the hills, stands of pine and copses of oak between them. And past that, down on the plains, hours and hours away with no distinguishing features except a straight stretch of wide river that ran off until losing itself in a bend. There, very small, the red roofs of a brickyard and its chimneys, tall but still lost in the distance.

There they stood, and then they realized that there was nothing to do now except go back.

But that night in bed she couldn’t sleep, the brilliant clarity in her head just would not go away. She relived the whole day over and over again and saw everything again, perfectly clear. And all at

once it was like the sun itself was inside her skull: "I love him. I can't help it. I want to. God be with me." She got out of bed and drank down her whole carafe of water.

The next morning she sat in her nightie on the edge of the bed and looked down at her ankles and pondered. "That's the way it is, I guess." But the brilliant clarity was gone.

He didn't want to think. As a proper, respectable gentleman he sat quiet and aloof on Line Two on his way to the office.

"Mornin', ladies and gentlemen." And he grimly went to his desk and started sorting his mail.

X

It was the end of March when the fullness of time arrived.

All day long they had corrected proofs, Dora and he. They were all business. Coba was with Bobi in The Hague visiting a rich cousin from the Indies. They had both taken a few days off from the office.

At five o'clock she had gone home to eat and afterwards she came back to finish their work. When twilight fell they were done, the stack of paper lay on the table with the letter to the publisher next to it, all it needed now was stamps.

It was in a room upstairs in the city but on the edge of the city—the canal in front of the house had an open field on the other side. Dora sat on a chair by the stove, in a coat and hat, and looked into the fire and thought about the fullness of time, a fullness that lay a long way off for *her*. He lay flat on the couch between the window and the stove, so flat that she could hardly see him in the dark room, and he looked at the yellow light of the streetlamps on the ceiling and the red glow from the stove on the floor.

Behind the house was the city, lamps lit in many of the windows, but they didn't see them because they were sitting at the front of the house. When Dora looked up she saw the countryside where the high sky was losing its last light and darkness already lay across the earth.

The little poet had had enough, of everything. His book was finished, he had murdered his never-ending poem, his position in society was a farce. Coba and Bobi had enough to live on without him. God would console them; time heals all wounds. That was a proverb on the wall of his aunt's house in Velp.

It was spring. It still looked like winter but it was spring. It still snowed here and there and it was a bit cold at night, with a frost sometimes, but that was just a little pleasantry, nothing to take too seriously.

The days were growing longer, people turned on their lights at seven o'clock. At six thirty the gas lamps were lit along the canal, they hung there pale and astonished. The snow swirled around them, in little spring snowflakes and melted before it fell onto the street.

And they both thought about the summer rains that would come, and their noses, the noses of incorrigible bohemians who *couldn't* stifle their souls, smelled the fresh hay. He, grim as the title of his book, *Genghis Khan*, and as grim as the book itself, thinking that he would never smell that smell again, that this too he had forsaken in kingly abdication; she full of vague longings and so, so moved in her heart. She folded her hands on her skirt where it was stretched tight between her knees; she sat there like that, bent forward on her chair.

The cows had already been out in the fields, he and she had seen them one sunny day. The land had recognized them right away and they stood trustingly on it and the sun was happy to see them too.

After that the days had grown colder again and the cows had had to go back inside for a time. But in the end the hail couldn't stop the spring.

The birch trunks were silvery white, but prettier than silver. Language is poor, fatally poor. Anyone who knows the Father's work knows that.

The meadows looked less waterlogged, the farmers had spread manure, the sun rose higher and set more slowly. And Dora thought about how the sun had been big and red and cold in the sky in December, and low near the horizon at four o'clock, and had passed into a cold mist and vanished, weak and defenseless. But that was a long time ago. And she thought about how in winter people turned on their lights at four o'clock and hoped that daylight would eventually return. But now she knew for certain that the sun would come up the next morning. And after that, well, what then?

Still they said not a word.

He thought back to the time when he had worked, "worked hard" as people like to say. And how his family had said that he was starting to become more reasonable now. That he'd complained once about all the pressure he was under and about all sorts of things going wrong at the office, he'd said he was dreaming about them at night, and that his aunt had replied: "Yes, my boy, life is a serious business." She would surely read his book, and expect to receive a signed copy, and wait to see if it would be included in the subscription library. She would want to be horrified by it, but wouldn't dare since so many other people had praised it. He saw himself already circulating among the library subscribers in Velp and that *really* made everything worthwhile.

"What now?" Dora thought. She had seen the snow melt once more and the buds grow bigger on the trees. Next the crowns of the tall trees would turn brown all over.

It seemed to her that she had seen the same things a very long time ago, the same way, with her hands folded on her skirt, knees apart, bent forward on her chair.

The sun was shining again, she saw the houses in the light and the trees and the golden glow on the pond. She saw the weeping willow turn yellow, its branches hung down and they reached for the water, they hung in deathly silent yellow adoration over the pond and they saw their own yellow light in the water. The woolly white clouds sailed in the pond, they skimmed across the blue sky but didn't conceal it. And those were the weeping willows in the city in early spring, a material embodiment of God between the clog-like buildings, so tall, awakening a longing that is grace and misery at once. You turn the corner, a foul, disgusting corner next to a fish stall that stinks of marinated herring, and suddenly something blazes from your eyes into your heart, you see gold crash down like an ocean and you stand there and a little boy wipes his nose with the back of his hand and yells: "Fancypants!" That is Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands, in early spring.

It was almost night. The lumps of coal in the stove suddenly shifted with a thump and little flames shot up and their light filled the room.

"Dora," he said without warning, "what do you think of Penning?" Penning was another friend from his youth. He hadn't seen him in years and knew only that he'd become an engineer. And now he'd run into him two weeks ago and he had dropped by a few times while they were busy with the proofs, and each time he stayed and chatted for an hour. He was a big fresh-faced young man, well on his way to a fine career but still youthful outside of work. He'd told them that in a few months he was off to South America for a year or so, to dredge something somewhere or build a pier or something like that. The little poet had also brought him to see his mother-in-law, and she was instantly taken with him. Em didn't like him.

"What do you think of Penning?" "He's all right," Dora said absently. Silence. In the light the streetlamp cast on the ceiling you could see the shadows of falling snowflakes. They were bigger

now.

“Em’s getting married next month.” She looked up. He was talking so strangely again, it was like Bovenkerk with Em. She didn’t answer.

She suddenly saw before her eyes, like a long-forgotten thing, a wide river rushing toward the sea. Its waves propelled the sunlight toward the sea but the water and the light were without end. A little tugboat pulled a long train of boats along a blue and gold trail. The boat was tiny and insignificant, its steam pipe barely reached the sky and its smoke was only just visible, its hoarse cry was lost in space. For hours and hours it moved through the water, between the fields, under an awe-inspiring sky.

And she saw a long road full of dust and sunlight and solitude. And then something else again: a meadow, endless, and an alley of autumn trees a bit farther down, there in the sun, from the side, and all of it full of living gold and of blue sky. And then: a river down in a valley, already dark in the east and the day was dying in the west, yellow at first, far sadness, pale green above that, a day that did not want to die, the darkness powerfully rising, it rose from the land into the eastern sky and hurtled west, and there was the river, red and crying, it wanted to hold on to the light, the light that wanted to stay. And so the river flowed, with the light, down to the ocean she couldn’t see.

Then he said: “Penning keeps coming by because of you.” She was taken aback. It took a second before she understood what she had just heard him say.

“Listen, Dora. Accept him. He’s going to ask you, I know he will. Accept him, marry him. Don’t waste your life on art or anything to do with art.”

She sat the same way she had been sitting. The only difference was that she held her head up slightly higher. She looked at the window, which gleamed darkly with a few little dots of yellow light here and there, from the light of the streetlamp. One of the rare large snowflakes touched the pane and melted. She didn’t understand.

He laid his hand on her folded hands, his fingers touching hers along their whole length. And a wild desire surged up out of her body into her head, carried there by her blood, so strong that all of the clothes on her body were unbearable to her. For an instant. But she stood up calmly, holding on to the back of the chair with one hand. “I’m not going to marry.” She said it as though she were telling someone that the accountant had quit. As though he hadn’t said anything, he got up from the couch. “Here,” he said, “take this key? It’s for the front door. Bonger will come by your apartment to get it around ten. He’s staying here tonight. He had to move out of his old place today and can’t move into his new place till tomorrow. I told him I wasn’t sure if I’d be at home.”

“You’re going back out tonight?” She was now completely calm. She felt around on the table for the matches and lit the gas lamp. You couldn’t see a thing! “You’re going back out tonight?” He shrugged. “Maybe.” She looked straight at him but there was nothing unusual in his face, he looked the same as he often had during the past few days, when he was reciting one of the good bits from *Genghis Khan* and she looked up from correcting the proofs for a moment.

He brought her to the stairs.

“Night E., see you tomorrow night at Mom’s.” He pressed her hand. “G’night Dora, *au revoir camarade*.” For an instant she heard something in his voice that was always there whenever he repeated something his aunt had said. Strange. “Okay, bye.” “Bye!” he called after her as though imitating a sixteen-year-old girl. Then the door slammed shut.

She walked fast and had to dodge around all the puddles. It had almost stopped snowing, the wet flakes that were still falling swirled slowly down, a few landing on her face, which felt good. In the light of a streetlamp she saw the fat buds on one of the chestnut trees along the canal, with little glints of light where the buds were thickest.

There was a straight yellow band of light on the trunk, from top to bottom.

What had happened, actually? Another puddle, how deep it looked with the reflection of the sky in it, a reflected star twinkling in a gap between the clouds. You could get dizzy from staring at puddles all the time while you walked. She knew a sentimental German song about the happiness that was “Behind the Stars.” Or maybe it was deep in a puddle like this, all the way at the bottom. Nonsense, there was probably not even half an inch of water. *Her* day would come too. She *wanted*. But what did she want? Could *she* want something?

It was lovely to walk in the evening alone like this and let your thoughts come and go and come again. And since she was a little poetess she quoted Jacques Perk to herself as she dodged again to avoid a puddle and almost stepped right into another one: “To feel yourself bound to yourself through yourself alone.”

The mild wet wind blew all around her and she took a deep breath. “Easy for you to say.” And honestly, she almost bumped right into a couple standing under a streetlight, kissing. She suddenly felt like a lady: “What a vulgar pair!” *Der minnen vruchten ic u mildelijck gaf, Maer een ewich zuchten houde ic daer af*—“The fruits of love I graciously gave to you, But kept for myself only sighs that last forever.” The lady had vanished but still Dora blushed, all alone under the dark sky, at the “fruits” the woman in the poem had apparently given. And she suddenly remembered the feeling she had just had, my God, not ten minutes before: that all her clothes were absolutely unbearable on her body. She felt her cheeks burn. “It’s not going to happen.” Just then she found herself standing on her front stoop. Half past seven.

“Hi Mom, I’ll be right back down.”

But when she was up in her room and had thrown off her hat and coat, it became clear to her what had just happened. A powerful feeling of desolation and abandonment came over her, the sense that life was not worth living. She did not understand herself.

Why hadn’t she taken his hand and said “I love you”? Why didn’t she want to do what she wanted so badly to do? What could happen that would be worse than enduring this living death? Why was she here? Why must she die unloved? Not just kissed, *really* kissed. She glowed, her whole body glowed, her heart swelled. She unbuttoned her clothes in front of the mirror and looked at her breasts, so white in her black dress, and held them in her hands.

She was pure and untouched. What a joke. And in her great confusion she begged God to defile her. “Am I going crazy?”

Her coat slipped off the bed and landed with a muffled bump. It was the key. A thought shot through her head like a burst of flame: He had said goodbye to her, something was wrong, she had to go back. She calmly splashed some water on her face and put her clothes back on. “I forgot something, I’ll be back in half an hour.”

At eight o’clock she was standing in front of his door again and she rang the bell. No sound from inside. She rang the bell again and then resolutely opened the door with the key. No light anywhere. The empty, dark, silent house made her shudder, her heart was pounding, but she bravely went upstairs. The door to the front room stood open, the light from the streetlamp still shone on the ceiling and the red light from the stove still glowed on the floor. “E., where are you?” How horrible that sounded. She ran through the rooms, scared and brave. Then she went up the second flight of stairs.

The bedroom door was open a crack, there was light coming from inside. She rushed to push the door open, afraid she would turn around and run away.

“E., what are you doing?” He sat in total silence on the edge of the bed, staring down between his knees at the rug on the floor. He stood up: “Dora.” There was everything in that one word and she heard it.

Then they fell together through the light into unfathomable deeps and they felt their bodies like singing suns.

But in the back of his mind was an ice-cold corner, and in that corner he thought: “It’s revenge, she suffers to atone for the world” ...

The Devil was sitting in Café De Kroon, in the middle of the room next to a pillar. He placed his thin gold watch on the table in front of him. The two bumps on his forehead were bigger than ever.

“Quarter past eight. *Consummatum est.*”*

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. The God of heaven and earth was standing behind him. “*Consummatum est*, come see.”

XII

At ten thirty Bonger and Graafland found him. Bonger had gotten the key from the mother-in-law.

He stood stark naked in the middle of the room. His left arm hung at his side, beside his body, fist clenched; his right arm was raised, finger pointing upward. There was a faint scent of lilies of the valley. A blue barrette lay on the floor. The bed was in chaos.

“Eduard!” they both cried at the same time.

“I am God,” he said. “I am greater than God. I am the Immovable, the Merciless. I know no good and evil. I do what I must do. What I do is good.”

Bonger picked up a sheet from the bed and stepped over to him.

“Go away,” he said and took a step back.

Bonger didn’t move.

“Didn’t I say I was God? I am the eternal life. I am procreation. God has sent me. Do not cover me.”

Again he stepped back.

“Do not cover me. I am procreation. Bring all the women here, all the young women. All of them I say. I know who you are. You’re Bonger, the other one’s Graafland. I know you all right. Put the sheet on the bed. She must lie on it. The first one, put her on it, naked. The others don’t need to leave. They need to see. You can go, Bonger, you too Graafland.”

Bonger put his hand on his shoulder. “Stand still. Put your arm down.”

The arm dropped. Bonger threw the sheet around him. “Sit down on this chair.” He sat. Graafland gathered up his clothes, from the bed, from the chair, from the floor.

“Get dressed.”

He meekly, slowly put on all his clothes.

The little poet is dead now. The people in Delft or Oldenzaal were proven gloriously correct. He was definitely never quite right in the head.

His book is in its fourth printing and his collected poems have been published too, with an introduction by Professor Schar ten or someone like that. The weasel who managed to become the

financial editor of the *Provincial Arnhem and Gelderland Courant* tells anyone who will listen that they went to school together. And whenever he comes to Amsterdam, which is fairly often, he hurries up to Bonger and rattles on about the little poet and his work and acts important and always says that he sat next to him in school.

Coba is kindhearted and forgiving and unaffected, the way she always was. She has become devout, even without proverbs on the wall to help her, and she goes to the Dutch Reformed Church on Boezemsingel every Sunday, since she lives in Rotterdam now, as punishment for having flirted with someone once while she was married. Kindheartedly and forgivingly she thinks about how she too was walking right on the edge of the abyss.

Dora is an “unwed mother.” She works at an office in Rotterdam where her boss knows her story and doesn’t look down on her for it, on the contrary. Which is very unusual for a Rotterdammer.

Thanks to that one man, it seems to me, that abomination of a city may be spared on the Day of Judgment. Which is too bad, actually.

She and her child live with Coba and Bobi and she moves through her life with her head held high, proud and silent. She plans to get her diploma and then, with the money from her father, who is dead, study law. Definitely not literature. She wants to work, not think. But I don’t believe that she’ll ever stifle her soul. Those dear to God’s heart above all others have to bear that burden to the end.

June–July 1917

A POSTSCRIPT

For those who would like to know more about how love works, I will relate that Little Poet’s Dora originated as an idealized version of a young girl for whom I felt, from a distance, an old man’s affection.

After she read the manuscript I told her that, and her response was: “But I never played diablo.” She said it not out of coquetry or embarrassment, she had simply not understood a thing.

NESCIO
January 5, 1918

FROM AN UNFINISHED NOVEL ^[1]

MY LIFE is too short, I can't go any faster, my work is a cathedral and I need a long time, centuries. And how much longer do I have?

It was back when I was still planning to write the big thick book that I'll never write and that you have to have written to become famous, or so they say. A big novel made of reinforced concrete, two volumes if possible, and epic, really epic—the epic saga is the highest genre of literature, I read that somewhere too, more than once. Those people write whatever they feel like. They endlessly make art, dead literature and other dead works of art, and it doesn't seem to kill them either.

I was in love then too, I usually fell in love when all I had from my novel was the title. That's not good for an epic.

When it gets to that point you have to talk about it. You can't always keep quiet. So I talked, I said more in a few evenings than I had in the six months before.

I had met someone that summer, someone I went to school with eighteen years earlier, and right away we started talking and couldn't stop. That happens only once or twice in a lifetime. When one of us talked the other one sat there without thinking about what he was going to say when it was his turn, he listened, eloquently. We couldn't get enough of it.

We sat outside at the Tolhuis café one evening and looked out across the IJ at the city. The electric lights along the railroad embankment burned lavender up above, against a dark blue sky. There was heat lightning around the three sharp spires of the church on Haarlemmerstraat, a train engine was puffing under the glass and iron roof of Centraal Station, the streetcar drove grumbling across De Ruyterkade, the water rose and fell, desolate, cold blue, in nervous, short, paltry waves, made a weak noise against the stone edge of the seating area and smelled faintly of stagnant water. Nearby, in total silence, a fisherman's little boat lay on the water, its bare mast sticking scrawnily up against the dark city with its tip in a light patch of sky. I saw that the little boat looked tall from the front and short from the back and I liked just looking at it like that.

It was quiet, there were not many people, we could barely hear them talking. There was the sound of glasses and cups now and then, the city on the opposite shore breathed softly and innocently and innocently shone its violet and yellow lights that zigzagged as reflections in the IJ.

And then *he* started to talk, the way someone talks who has kept many things to himself and can't keep them to himself any longer.

But you need to be patient with me. I'll get there, in fact the novel has already started, we are all, so to speak, in the middle of it, you just haven't noticed yet.

Last night came the report that the Triple Alliance had accepted Wilson's proposal. This morning I went into the city to see if people were drunk. It was a soft gray October Sunday morning and the little trees on the Damrak had only a few leaves left. The IJ was so quiet, so bluish gray, and behind a few long furrows it quietly thought back over the year that was coming to an end. But it was quiet on the streets, no drunk people celebrating, no flags. I wonder when shoes will get cheaper.

October is especially beautiful this year, we live in a golden city, and not for any amount of money, not for a hundred thousand rijksdollar bills would I want to be respectable. I'd rather just stay who I am, a piece of humanity like this walking right at the edge of the embankment, beyond the trees, stopping and turning around every time, like someone a little confused. And it has stopped raining, it hasn't rained for days and I'm no longer dreaming about wet feet, I'm wide awake. And definitely

confused.

The novel, my dear sir! We are in the middle of it.

There was no one on that stretch of Herengracht. The green and gold crowns of the trees were still thick with leaves. One by one the yellow and brown leaves slowly fell, you could count them as they fell. They lay quietly on the cobblestones, which were damp, and black, and in a little puddle that was still there somehow. Whole fields of them lay quiet in the water of the canal.

October 13, 1918

[\[1\]](#) Draft material from a piece Nescio abandoned; see note on page 159.

THE VALLEY OF OBLIGATIONS

I SIT ON the hill and look down into the valley of obligations. It is barren, there is no water, there are no flowers or trees in the valley. A lot of people are milling around, most of them drooping and misshapen and constantly looking down at the ground. Some of them look up every once in a while and then they scream. They all die sooner or later but I don't see their numbers decrease, the valley always looks the same. Do they deserve anything better?

I stretch and look up past my arms at the blue sky.

I stand in the valley on a slag heap next to a small pile of scrap wood and a broken wash kettle. And I look up and see myself sitting up there, and I howl like a dog in the night.

November 1922

NO, YOU'RE wrong. This isn't what you think. Twenty years have passed since 1917. From 1897 to 1917 was twenty years too, but those were years of a completely different kind. You create a world of your own, you reject this and take a close look at that, you discover, you add more, and finally you see that it is good. And then the disintegration starts, slowly at first, you barely notice it and don't realize what's happening. What you've worked so hard to make your own— what you love— disappears or changes into something unrecognizable: landscapes and waterscapes, roads, bridges, buildings, villages and cities, people too. They don't ask you first, they just do it. The elms near the Kortenhoef church that reached up to the tip of the spire were chopped down years ago, and they cut down the tall trees on the dike facing Rhenen too, the trees that went with Rhenen the way the gatehouse goes with an abbey. You have to walk farther than ever to find anything like what you love, anything that hasn't been altered yet. If you're an ordinary little citizen and move around in your own little world, you won't find much.

So you're wrong if you think "Oh, good!" and hurry to start reading. The terrible disintegration won't matter to you, it won't touch you at all. You think, thank God, that what you think is more important than the German Reich, Mussolini, Russia, and the Japanese put together.

Far, far away I see Koekebakker, a tiny figure on a bicycle on the road between Hakkelaarsbrug and Muiden. It's a brick road with grass growing between the bricks. It is in June, the sun is low in the sky, the water in the barge canal is smooth and reflects the reeds. The bicycle whirs over the bricks. Other than that there is silence. Then he gets off the bike and suddenly it is even more silent, the bike isn't whirring anymore, he hears his watch ticking in his vest. Just think back to that, if you can: June 1904.

Suddenly the man sitting across from me says: "There are only five things worth bothering about, and I list them here in order of importance: Amsterdam, early spring, the last ten or fourteen days of August, women, and the incomprehensibility of God. From most to least important." He has a walking stick and he's sitting with both his hands on the knob and his chin on his hands, old-fashioned as all get out, and he's looking at me through his pince-nez and wearing a bowler hat that he could have bought from Kniepstra, the shopkeeper on Dapperstraat who died of consumption forty short years ago (I say consumption, not tuberculosis), and in his wide, tanned, fifty-year-old face covered in crow's-feet above his heavy cheekbones, his eyes twinkle and his forehead has deep, undulating furrows. And I know that he's just talking off the top of his head, there are plenty of other things worth bothering about. They don't ask you first, they just do it. But by God they haven't heard the last from us. One day we will stand up firm and steadfast again for what was always worth bothering about but never mattered to them.

Everything went so differently from how we thought. That the world didn't care much about us—we all understood that a long time ago. But we still thought, for a while longer, that it was up to us to make the silent course of things take their course.

The man across from me says that he and that silent course of things have nothing more to say to each other. "Laugh at it and hit back. Other than that, God only knows." His high bony forehead has two very sharp planes. He says in his Amsterdammish: "The more barbarians the better, as far as I'm concerned."

Maybe you weren't wrong after all, though it's slow going at first. The man across from me stands up to leave and notices that he'd kept his hat on the whole time. "And I," he says (now in proper

Dutch), “I used to be a real gentleman.”

On the landing, he says: “Mister Koekebakker, I hope that we will see one another again. I have read your little books with great pleasure, but I have one thing to say to you: You are too good-natured.”

And that was the beginning of the end.

December 14, 1937

[\[1\]](#) Unfinished and unpublished by Nescio; see note on page 161.

FEBRUARY 1942. A gray, icy day. A stiff nor'easter, several degrees below zero, overcast sky, and snow on the streets. Sticky hard snow clumped into mounds at the edge of the sidewalks; narrow, beaten paths where people walk with difficulty, single file, sometimes stumbling, looking at one another's legs, bumping into everyone they pass and everyone they overtake. On side streets the snow lies thick and sticky in the middle of the street.

A hostile world, a world in tatters. A world of cold and poverty. Poverty in the many thin wrinkled faces, in the closed shutters of many shops, in the frosted-over shop windows, poverty in the streetcar rails where no streetcars were driving even though the snow had been cleared off somewhat, poverty in the little line of people by the corner of the old Jamin candy store, next to a pile of snow six feet high, poverty in the stands selling frozen fish that no one is buying, in the snatches of conversation you overhear.

"I've still got a sack of coal, and some peat." A woman is talking to another woman, shouting across the whole width of the street. Another one, a bit farther on: "I've got nothing left in the house."

Poverty in people's heads: ration cards, food, fuel. And: "How much longer?" Especially the growing children, between fourteen and twenty, they need so much.

The poultry shop isn't there anymore. It has big sheets of yellow cardboard over the window and black paper covering the glass in the door, there is no name or anything else written on the window, it is unrecognizable, gone, a woman walks out of the door and there's nothing remarkable about her except that she's leaving such a mysterious house.

This is not just a day in February, it's a day in the final February, the month that no months will follow. A gentleman in a hat, collar, tie, and a very nice duffle coat is dragging a little sled behind him with a little bit of anthracite on it, he is going to try to survive this month of February in spite of the painful white impassable world down below and the pitiless gray sky up above and the icy wind. That's what we all want to do, except for the people who aren't buying the frozen fish from the fishmongers shivering and stomping their feet and blowing into their cold hands. Why isn't anyone buying fish? Is fish so expensive now that the thought of maybe surviving this month of February runs up against the price and gives up?

Somewhere in the snow, between a stall selling sliced red cabbage and sliced Hoorn carrots and parsnips and another stall selling filleted flounder, there are three big tin milk cans and an even bigger, bulbous brass milk tank and a wooden crate with empty milk bottles. Just sitting there for no apparent reason. Women and a few men come and stand nearby with canisters in their hands. They stand there stoic and resigned, we have learned how to be stoic.

And then suddenly the past is standing there, suddenly it's 1900, 1910, 1920. It's Flip. I never forget faces from that time. An older man with a wretched walrus mustache that's dirty yellow and gray with poverty, and a poor man's red nose, but without a drop hanging off the end at least. On his head is a flat black fur hat with a shabby bare patch, he has on a colorless cheap tweed coat that used to be gray, years ago, and now is just dingy. But in this old-looking face I can very clearly see Flip's face and he's wearing the same pince-nez, the kind that goes with a walking stick, the same one he looked at me over in 1900 when he recited Kloos's "The trees are barren, late in the season." I see him look the same way he looked at me then and I feel the same feeling: he doesn't think I understand

a thing, he thinks it's a shame he recited this poem for me. They all thought I was pretty silly back then, and here on Dapperplein, after more than forty years, I am no longer the retired executive (God in heaven!), no longer the well-known writer, but just a silly kid with long pants that are much too short. And I see the assistant director sitting at his desk again, he looks across his desk at the bank representative and then over to me and then back at the man across from him and he taps his forehead. And again I am sitting a little off to one side with the people out to change the world in the Horseshoe Café on the Dam (torn down a long time ago), and again I can't tell if they're pulling my leg or not.

And now he's standing in the snow, gray and wrinkled, stoic, with his milk pot and his walrus mustache, looking at the sticky snow. And Kloos, and the plans from back then to change the world, and the green rye fields of Brabant too, and the bluish oat fields ringed with trees in the glaring sun of early July, there between Dommelen and Keersop, how very, very far away they seem, as far away as a ham sandwich and a half-pound packet of tobacco. To the left the shadow of an avenue of trees lies over the oat field, and next to that the rye field with a blue cornflower here and there, and a little pasture too with two red-brown cows.

In the snow a large man has appeared with thick shoes, a dirty yellowish corduroy jacket, and V.A.M.I. [1] in copper letters on the front of his cap, and he has a liter measuring scoop in his large hand and he scoops, dead and dispassionate, and people walk away dead and dispassionate, with their pans and their milk pots. Thank God he has some today—so there is a passion after all, or the corpse of a passion—and when Flip turns around with his gray enamel milk pot, with the enamel chipped off in a couple of places, I say “Bonjour, Flip,” like it was 1920 and I'd just seen him yesterday.

And he looks at me through his pince-nez again, a little teary, holds the milk pot in front of the top button of his jacket, and then he says: “God almighty, Dikschei.” Then he looks at the milk pot and smiles and that smile both tells the whole story of his downfall and smiles it off, and we stand on the snow-covered sidewalk, a little ways off from the milk cans, the last woman is just leaving with her milk pot and between us and this impoverished barren world is an endless garden full of wheat fields and grass and trees and flowers and winding streams. The world is green again. It is a day in May again and we're sitting on the Vink by the edge of the water and drinking coffee, of course, we always drank coffee, no matter what the weather. The chestnut trees and lilacs are blooming, and the goldenrain, and there are still a few apple trees in bloom, the calves are standing out in the orchard, the little lambs leap on their little legs the same way they leapt when Akhenaton was alive, the sunlight glitters in the Gein, the first water lilies are floating on the water next to the reflection of the willows, the meadows and roadsides are covered with dandelions and buttercups, the trees cast their shadows on the duckweed in the ditches, larks and blackbirds and birds I don't know the names of sing and chirp, a swallow skims the surface of the water, a frog croaks very loud and suddenly there's the cry of a long-forgotten bird, the cuckoo cries, very far away, and another one answers, very far away, the sound comes from so far away, thoughts can hardly come from farther.

Other than that his story was like countless others. Laid off from his office, or “rationalized away” as the phrase went, with half a year's salary, eventually on public assistance, a few odd jobs here and there. “I would invite you out ...” He fell silent, looked down at his milk pot. “I'm staying with my brother and his wife, also unemployed. Nothing fancy, it's no manor house with a garden.” Again he fell silent, it was a rather miserable attempt at a little joke. “You must live around here?” I said. “Take your milk pot home and come with *me*.” “You won't take me anywhere fancy?” “Stop whining and come along. We'll never have anything as nice as we used to anyway.” He raised his pince-nez to look at me. “You think we won't?” He tapped his forehead, the way the assistant director

had, but slowly and thoughtfully. “*Here* you can have everything as nice as you want.” “All right then, drop off your milk and let’s go.”

II

And so then we were sitting in De Poort van Muiden, with a view of the Colonial Museum and the vestiges of the Muiderbosch forest, and we kept our coats on since the heating wasn’t the best, and the waiter stood at our table and looked down at the dingy shoulders of Flip’s dingy coat. He stared a little too hard and too long, but *my* coat was still in good shape, three years old and barely worn and that made up for a lot.

And so then we were sitting across from each other again, he who’d been rationalized away and I who had done some rationalizing of my own until I’d collapsed under the absurdity of it all. And then we were drinking coffee together again, stubbornly ignoring that it was coffee substitute, and his drooping mustache hung over the rim of his coffee cup and a little coffee was left on his mustache and to get the conversation going I asked Flip if he remembered how the woman at the office used to attach his vest to his pants with a safety pin because his shirt always used to hang out in the front. And how the boss had suggested that maybe it was time to buy a new suit. “And while you’re at it, buy a hat instead of that cap.” And how he’d bought a derby hat, after all a writer and do-gooder and reformer out to change the world is an office worker too, in the end, he can’t get by without his salary, but he hadn’t bought the suit, he couldn’t afford it. Flip, stained blue because he could never figure out the typewriter, neither the ribbon nor the carbon paper, and so he smudged and smeared everything, his hands, his paper, his face.

He wiped his mustache with a napkin that wasn’t entirely clean to begin with. He stood up and hung his fur cap on the coat rack, he was getting warm. His hair rose up on one side of his part, the same as it used to, but it was a color there is no name for. Not gray, or yellow, or dirty brown either, but with something of all of those, more or less. It was a head of hair both full and pathetic, the same as his mustache, the whole man was rather sad and resigned just then, rather gray and furrowed, rather too much of a piece with his dingy coat that the waiter had so objected to. He objected to the man himself, as a matter of fact, and he stood at the back of the café with a napkin draped over his arm, looking outside, and clearly not finding the whole situation very much to his taste.

Yes, Flip remembered it all very well. He smiled, but only weakly, and he still looked a little teary, but the tip of his nose wasn’t as red anymore.

I summoned the waiter and ordered two rolls with butter and ham and had already calmly put the ration cards on the table before he could say anything. “And two more coffees.” I saw him take a look at my coat; he almost looked human. “Yes, sir, just a moment.” “Really,” Flip said. “I eat all day long,” I lied. He sat there resigned.

When the waiter came back, he was human. He had two plates, he looked at me for a moment then put one in front of Flip and one in front of me, and each of them had two thin slices of bread with ham, and Flip said “Oh,” and the coffee (not coffee substitute— there was no such thing), the coffee gave off curling wisps of steam and Flip sat there quietly and looked at me over his pince-nez again with his extremely nearsighted eyes and then he smiled, not pathetically anymore but the way you smile at someone who has done you a real favor. That was nice of Flip.

Then he turned his full attention to the food and drink and we didn’t say anything for a while. His mustache kind of spoiled things, but was also kind of nice in its own way. And then I said, “That book

of yours, remember?" The book that was finally published, and reviewed (a bit condescendingly), and not read, and forgotten almost twenty years ago. Flip just shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands. At the time he had found it rather depressing. But it wasn't much of a book anyway, he knew that now.

"I've thought of you often, Dikschei, and envied you, because you will leave something good behind you. Good for you and for me and for a few other people, at least. I'm long past that. Not that I don't think it's very nice, what you wrote, for me and the few other people, but as for me ... I've long since given up on immortality. Everything ends in ..." He paused for a moment, looked sadly outside. "In snow and ice." I fidgeted.

He wiped his mouth again. Then he looked right at me through his pince-nez and said, "How do I seem to you, actually?" I said I had to think about it. "You can just say it. I know perfectly well how I am, and how I seem to you too. I seem pathetic." I stayed silent a moment longer, looked down at the lenses of his pince-nez, and then nodded.

"I'm not pathetic. I am an island."

"An island," I said, as expressionlessly as I could. "Isn't everyone an island?"

"Maybe, I don't think much about everyone, but *I* am an island."

Silence for a while. I stared at the ring of a coffee stain on the table. "It won't come out," Flip said, wiping it with his semi-clean napkin. The waiter was standing a ways off, still waiting for customers who never came. He looked disapproving.

"Not just an island. I am a big island. There is everything on it. You remember the Dommel with its bends, its half-ruined little bridges, its half-ruined waterwheels, its meadows, its wheat fields, its willows and poplars. Do you remember Valkenswaard, Dommelen, Keersop, Breugel and Son?"

I nodded to each one.

"And the Moerdijk? And the Tongeren cathedral? And the chalk cliffs of Dover the way we saw them from Sangatte over the calm, rippled, blue sea? And the view of the IJssel and the Veluwe near Westervoort? Can you see the Gooi forests from here across the Loosdrecht lakes? Stand at the ferry landing and see Schoonhoven across the Lek in the half dark and hear the bell towers toll eight o'clock?"

I just nodded. I saw it all very clearly. Later I would return to every one of those places, more than once.

"No snow, no ice. Just whole rivers of flowing water. The Rhine, the Waal, the Maas, the Scheldt below Antwerp. I can't name them all. And cities: Middelburg, the way it used to be, Maastricht, Hattem, Lier, Saint-Omer, I can't name them all. All of the Netherlands, and Belgium, and a corner of France. I've carved out the worthless parts."

"And not occupied?"

He looked up. Now *he* had to stop and think for a minute. He looked back down at the ring.

"The Occupation?" he said, musing. "I've never thought about that. No. How could someone occupy me? That has nothing to do with me. Being poor has nothing to do with me either. My island is a sanctuary, a monastery. Without walls, an enormous monastery. Dapperplein isn't there. And when I'm standing on Dapperplein I'm not there myself."

We were silent. Then he asked: "What time is it? ... Twelve thirty, then I have to go, they're waiting for me, my brother and his wife." He didn't say: "go home."

We left. I saw that he still had good shoes, greased leather with thick soles, big and unwieldy but strong and whole.

"Where do you live?"

I gave him my address. “You have to come see me,” I said. “I’m home almost every morning from ten thirty to noon in this weather. And evenings, when we’re allowed to go out again.” He looked thoughtful. “All right. Yes, I’ll come, I’ll come by in the next couple of days. I feel like talking.”

I walked home, watching where I set my feet, and finally reached the canal ring and looked around. Everything there was white, I thought about the eventual death of all things, there were mounds of hard sticky snow on the ice, six half-dead gulls sat shivering between the piles of snow, you almost couldn’t see them. This used to be my water, reflecting the houses lit by the sun and their reflections glittered with sunlight too. There was no water *anywhere*. Middenweg lay there dead and white, but in the distance black trees rose up from the white and waited. “How much longer?”

I kept walking, on a path of hard dirty-brown and white muck. The world was gone again, all that was left was the path and my galoshes.

III

Luckily it’s thawing.

We’re sitting, each on one side of my stove, in comfortable low chairs and each smoking a little cigar and the flames in the stove dance gently up and down.

Luckily it’s thawing. You can see the sky through the windows again, a damp, mild, gray sky. The windows had been frosted over for a long time, while the stove burned, and the house was besieged by winter.

Luckily it’s thawing. I’ve stretched out my legs and I lean back with my hands behind my head and look at Flip and Flip looks into the fire and smokes intently, the way you can only smoke in wartime when there are no more cigars.

Then he says: “Lucky that it’s thawing. I already felt a drop on my skull from a house. On the way here.”

I look at Flip and listen and feel my youth, supposedly past, I see and hear my youth and I feel my freedom. I’m free, after forty years I’m free, and I can cut my hair whenever I feel like it and let it grow too if I want.

Insula Dei.

He is dressed well. A dark black suit with narrow gray pinstripes, a bright white collar, a blue tie with little white polka dots. A suit left over from his better days, saved and cared for, probably six or eight years, a suit to apply for jobs in, at least if he’s kept that illusion. Illusion! The knees are a bit shiny, maybe some other patches too. But he’s come to see me in a hat with no visor, a beret, and a drop of water fell on it and he felt it through the hat.

Flip holds his cigar under his nose and smells it intently. We are in the time when the cigar shops have empty boxes in their display cases and a sign hanging on the door: “Sold Out. Please do not ring unnecessarily.” I know that I have sixty-five cigars left, after these two, and I don’t think any farther ahead than that.

“I still had a few genuine Havanas,” Flip says. “Last year, when I was staying with my brother in Eindhoven, I always used to light one up after a meal, in secret.” He smiled. “In secret?” “Yes, I didn’t want to share them with him. One-and-a-half-guilder cigars.” I say “Insula Dei” and he just shrugs his shoulders and spreads his hands wide. Just like Flip. I wonder how many of those cigars he might have had back then.

For now, we sit there pleasantly relaxed, it’s warm and we’re smoking and spring is coming.

While we sit there we're getting closer and closer to spring and both of us know it.

We already know how each other's life has gone. We don't need to talk about the war: we've looked each other in the eye a couple of times. We only need to sit quietly and the past rises up between us and spreads out all around us, we see the faces, we hear the voices, we see the endless meadows, we see the house fronts and the rivers and streams, the water splashes, if we listen closely we can hear the creeks too, "burble burble," a cow is standing in the creek, we see the leaves on the trees. We sit out in front of the little cafés on the market squares and we wait on the ferry causeways, hands on our bicycles.

"A lot has changed," Flip says. "They've cut down the elms near the Kortenhoef church." "A long time ago," I say. "They reached to the top of the spire, it completely changed the landscape. Remember when Ko shaved his beard off? It was like that." I nod. "Another cigar?" At first he wants to say no, but the occasion is *too* pleasant. I light myself another one too. Only sixty-three left. "And our trees on the dike across from Rhenen. A stand of trees such as our dear Lord gives us here and there. And tall too, hmm, *they* were tall trees. And they went with Rhenen. Had to strengthen the dike. So they chopped down our trees. Who were *we* that they shouldn't chop them down because of us? It would have cost money to do it differently. Then Rhenen was like an abbey without a gatehouse." He is quiet for a while. "And now Rhenen must be lying in ruins."

"And the Muiderweg," I begin. "I can see myself biking between Naarden and the Hakkelaar bridge. June 1904. June 1904, just think back to that, if you can. I was coming from the Gooi, on a Saturday, near evening. The sun was low in the sky, the water in the canal was totally still and reflected the reeds. The grass was growing between the stones."

While I tell it the thirty-seven or thirty-eight years disappear, they never were, they are still to come. My bicycle whirs over the bricks. Other than that, silence. I get off my bike and suddenly it is even more silent, the bicycle is no longer whirring, I hear my clock tick in my vest.

"Just think back to that, if you can, Flip."

We smoke. "And just think of the hell of cars only twenty years later."

"Yes," Flip says, "now they've put a big highway next to the bike path, over the canal, and the grass grows between the stones there too. A long time ago too."

"1904. Do you feel old?" he suddenly asks.

I think about it, thoroughly think it over, but it just takes a moment. "No. And you?"

"I used to." His left arm went up, bent, and he made a gesture with his hand as though waving away smoke. "I used to feel that way. You think they're destroying your world. At first you barely notice, you don't realize what's happening. Everything you've mastered with such difficulty disappears or changes beyond recognition. They don't ask, they just do it. Paths and waterways, bridges, houses, villages and cities. People too. After twenty years I went back to Castricum and The Resting Hunter was still there but I couldn't see it at first, it was so surrounded by everything. The main street looked like a bad haircut and then those 'darling little apartments' everywhere, dear God. Where can you still find a nice slender bridge? They need to be wide, for the traffic, much too wide for such short bridges. Abominations. And then 'artistic' too sometimes. I ask you. As long as they can drive fast. What do they know of God's slenderness? The double drawbridge from Ouderkerk is high and dry in an open-air museum on the heath near Arnhem, *incredibile dictu*."

"So," I think, "it looks like he's kept up his Latin."

He keeps talking. "Now that all seems like nothing. You have to hike farther and farther to find anything that hasn't changed, that still resembles what you used to like. But if you're an ordinary person moving around through your own little world, you won't find much. It seemed pretty dreadful

to me, for a while. I wondered if it wasn't up to us—to me, to you, to the people like us—whether the silent course of things could continue or not.

“God is often incomprehensible. His incomprehensibility is never far away. Just think about the snow that day when we ran into each other last week. And the neighborhood.”

His cigar has gone out. Slowly and laboriously he digs a match out of his vest pocket and an empty matchbox out of his jacket, re-lights the cigar, looks at the smoke, cautiously opens the stove by pulling on the knob with his hand in his handkerchief (a clean one), and tosses in the used match.

“Now I know better: God is here.” He points at his forehead and for the first time I really see the deep furrowed grooves, and that his eyebrows are black and long, the hairs wavy and dirty-colored and sad like his mustache. But he looks a lot less wretched now and I can't help thinking that for very little money a barber could make a whole new man of him. “God is here.” Where have I heard that before?

Again, Flip keeps talking.

“Why should people have to cross their bridge slower for my sake, or your sake? God is with those people too, he has to do something for them, they have to go about their business too. We have so much else.

“Someone like you or me,” Flip says, and he looks at me. While he was talking he was cleaning his pince-nez with a real (and clean) chamois cloth, and now he looks at me over the top of it, with his nearsighted eyes, the way he always did when his heart was full of feeling. Looks at me like a faithful dog.

“This world is too small for someone like you or me,” he says. “We have the world inside us, and in it we are God's envoy, Dikschei. And in it God is not incomprehensible. What is the pope, Dikschei, compared to us? The pope, tied down to everything? We are God's humble servant. And you wander around in that world in all modesty and you're happy and meanwhile you're nailing rubber soles onto your brother's old shoes and you sit there hammering and you yell, ‘Mie, you're burning the milk.’”

“You have milk again?”

His cigar has gone out.

“Yesterday morning we did,” he says. He deposits an absolutely miserable little stub of cigar in my stove and struggles to his feet.

As I help him into his old tweed coat, I ask, “Are you still looking for work?” He shrugs his shoulders again. “Do you still have that derby hat?” And we both have a short laugh. That derby hat from Kniepstra, who had a shop on Dapperstraat, who died of consumption forty years ago. “Back then we died of consumption, not tuberculosis. So, see you soon. You have to come by and see where I live, even though it's not very nice. Yes, that derby hat. It was so big it fell down over my ears.”

He looks thoughtfully down at the tips of his greased-leather shoes.

“I don't believe I was cut out to be a true gentleman, Dikschei.”

IV

I am sitting in front of my stove again, thinking. *Insula Dei*. I have to think about that. Is it only a refuge for old men?

The thinking is not going so well. The gray sky is almost white and it looks like a soft rain is coming.

The room grows darker. Rain! And out of the past, a past from five weeks ago but so, so far away, the trees in Frankendael Park rise up out of the past, blue and red drops glisten on the branches, a white drop sparkles fiercely and trembles and suddenly is pale blue. The trees are bare, of course they're bare, it's January. Long ribbons of light glow on the branches and when I look up I see all the delicate twigs and the little buds against the faint blue sky. The treetops are already looking toward spring, in the distance, and down below the black trunks lead their own lives. A doe could stand there with raised head and childlike eyes, and why do I never get to see the dancing pixies? It is almost spring after all. *I* would catch a cold and rheumatism if I did but the stone maiden stands there with her naked breasts, so many stone maidens have *nothing* on and stand in gardens in January, the enviable things, and they stay healthy for a hundred and fifty years, two hundred years.

How often in summer I have looked at those same trees, full of leaves, looked at the light on the trees and the shadow, and the darkness under the crowns. Every day I went by and looked. There were shadows from the leaves on the grass; in between, the light was intensely golden. Then it was as if the trees had always been there, exactly the same, and always would be. Who, when he sees a friend, thinks that he will never see him again? Now the ground between the trees is brown and dingy, it's the leaves from back then, and not even all the leaves. I looked at them so many times and it didn't help them a bit, they fell anyway.

Insula Dei. I force my thoughts back to that.

Yes. And no. I think about these eventful times. You want to do something, make a difference. But these aren't the first eventful times I have lived through and if I'm granted even more years then with God's help I will most likely get to my third war. The silent course of things takes its silent, implacable course, the little man who is a hero today will tomorrow, when peace comes, be scolded in his stupid little job or maybe won't have a job at all and will turn back into the useless piece of clockwork he used to be. And if he has a little more to him, maybe he will read the first chapter of Ecclesiastes: "All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it."

Eventful times. What remains from Italy's eventful times in the thirteenth century except Dante's *Inferno*?

Do. As if I haven't had enough pointless doing. Oh *they* have nothing else, they only are when they do. I want to be, and for me to do is: not to be.

It slips away from me again. I see the spring. Like the highest branches of the trees I see the spring from far away. God help me, what a winter we've had. Cold. And snow and everything jumbled together. A train has pulled into Amsterdam-Muiderpoort Station from Utrecht, going to Centraal Station, and the stationmaster is about to give the signal to proceed when he quickly asks the conductor hurrying onto the train, "Tell me, what train are you again?"

But now it's thawing, thank God. I think back to last year's crocuses in the parks in Groningen, in the gardens of the villas on the way to Haren, and farther. Spring was late last year. The crocuses were in full bloom in mid-April. Yellow, purple, and white, the vanguard of spring. And the Paterswolde lake lay there in the distance, you are standing a little higher in the landscape but you barely see the meadows sloping down, there are low dikes with willow trees on them, the alder catkins are hanging down, here and there a farm-stead is surrounded by tall trees, there are even a few cows in a scrawny pasture. Over there too. I count seven. The lake is all dark blue beneath the April sky, in front of the Elder woods that are the outer edge of the world, small from a distance but also large. And black. And at the same time blond. However I want to see them. In the middle is a large tree I recognize. And the next day the lake is pale blue and the day after that it's a delicate gray with a sail on it. A magnificent view, magnificent enough for me, my heart swells and the landscape swells

with it, the sky is so high, it is as though I could live there like that, without friends, without the baker and milkman and butcher and grocer, without garbage cans and clothes and even without cigars if necessary and without a pipe, and that's saying a lot. Ach, I will have to live without tobacco and cigars all too soon anyway, but not on the side of the road to Haren and not beneath the trees in the Frankendael. But I'll never be rid of the baker and the rest of them. Although God knows, maybe them too. But then the side of the road to Haren will be a very different roadside, like the one you sometimes read about in the paper, where a dead body is found in the winter sometimes. And as for clothes, I can't do without them, unfortunately, and the police go after nudists whenever they occasionally do turn up. "The beauty of the human body" is written in respectable books but we ordinary folks have to go to museums for it, if we ever get to see any of it at all.

It's clear I'm not up to it. It wouldn't be enough for me. "The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing."* Do I *want* to be satisfied? Yes. And no. There is no answer.

And suddenly I am at peace with it. There is no answer. That's good too. In a month the crocuses will be in bloom again. It's barely started thawing and already the women are looking around. There is still something to hold on to in this time of war: the thought of peace and the feeling for "that which is not of this earth." That doesn't sound bad, it even sounds a bit sublime.

So then: Insula Dei?

I give up and go eat a couple of slices of bread and butter. At the table I awaken in a clear, tangible world. It still feels strange for a moment. A plate, a knife, a fork, some leftover sauerkraut from the day before, it's clear exactly what you have here: not quite enough.

In the twilight that evening I walk past Frankendael again. The snow is still lying on the gardens in front of the manor house and it's still light out. But the tall trees are there, to either side. They are silent, life cannot be more silent.

I look slowly up past the trees. Down below the trunks rise up darkly out of the snow, it is a secretive, three-quarters-dark world where Dikscheis led astray by our dear Lord can frolic with nymphs like the ones you see in museums. But up above, the crowns of the trees against the last light of a pale sky look out into the distance. There is no sound, no wind. The trunks wait, they wait for an answer from the crowns. Are the herons returning? Is spring on its way?

And then God does what he always does, thank God, time and time again, every day. In the end that's why I could never make anything of myself in society. He shows me something that is not there: the blue lake next to the endless field with yellow daffodils, water and daffodils both waving in the breeze. Wordsworth's "Daffodils."

Wednesday, July 9, 1941, 9:30 p.m. German daylight time. The sun is low in the sky. Near the end of an unbearably hot day. A narrow bike path between young birch trees. Behind me is Waalre, behind me too is the magic alley of birch trees in Waalre that leads to the train station. At this late hour it is full of shadows, all the shadows of this whole blazing hot day have gathered under these trees. But here and there the sun still golds its way in, a heavy wagon jolts slowly ahead under a heavy vault of branches and leaves, the sun glides along the wagon's back, the driver walks alongside it, the low sun sparkles on a bicycle too, the eye doesn't reach all the way to the end of this alley, the vault ends in deep shadow, this road must lead somewhere good and peaceful where a stately man and a willowy woman with elegant faces are waiting for me in a white house with a large front lawn and beeches and lindens all around and with the tea waiting on the tea light. The road leads to the Aalst-Waalre station and service along that line has been canceled.

But the road is behind me, I have turned off to the left onto the bike path and am on my way to Eindhoven and I think about it only in passing.

For me the day has not been unbearably hot. Temperatures like this are fine with me, and almost no clothes—shirt, pants, and shoes; jacket draped over the handlebars. As Zus Zwaardecroon, the neighbor girl, would say: “Like a fairy.”

When I’m almost to Eindhoven, the countryside is wide open on both sides. Rye fields. The sun still burning, low and red. A stately row of Canadian poplars, a copse here and there. A striking emptiness and silence. The fields end somewhere but you can’t see where, lost in the distance against trees or bushes. And then there’s a fantastic golden cloud above the grain fields, climbing up out of the grain fields, shining and spreading up and to the right. The Judgment. I get off my bike, I await the Lord. The cloud drifts, drifts to the right and comes closer. And then something looms up out of the golden matter, at first it’s not clear what, but it’s not the Lord. And a moment later it’s a wagon piled high with hay, or rather, it’s hay that is slowly, listlessly, and almost inaudibly moving closer between the rows of grain, with a man sitting in front and a horse’s head enveloped in a drifting cloud of solid sunshine.

But the Lord is in the great silence and emptiness and in this wondrous end to a monumental day. The day has become mine once more and mine the enchanted world. The sun stands still, there will be no night. Time stands still; pitiless eternity takes pity. God has taken transience from me and from this blossoming world. The heavens arch still and blue over the benevolent green, the grain stands perfectly still and there is a golden radiance above it and the land lies there like someone you love. This world will always be, nothing more can come after it.

When my bicycle starts whirring again I suddenly hear a cuckoo. And all around, before and behind me and on either side, I hear its incomprehensible call. From where? Thirteen times this voice of God calls from beyond the bounds of understanding.

I am very grateful. “Hallelujah, praise he who is without beginning.” I have wrested a beautiful day from eternity. The sun has almost set. We’ll see what tomorrow brings.

And so I walk home through the snow in the last light and the island of God is all around me. There’s another light frost.

V

Wilted is the word. It’s still thawing, the snow has wilted into a filthy sludge, the neighborhood is wilted, the house is wilted. There is a tin nameplate on the door with letters the same color: B. den Oever. On the upstairs neighbor’s door a patch is bare where the bad kids kick if the door isn’t opened fast enough. And there’s not much paint either on the doors and window frames.

A tall, thin woman in black opens the door. She has jutting cheekbones and sunken cheeks and stands very straight. As small and narrow as she is, she fills the whole cramped hallway. “Is Mr. Philip den Oever home?” Having looked at me, she turns around and opens a door with her left hand: “Flip, someone here for you.” Then, without saying another word, she walks off down the hall to what I guess is the kitchen. She leaves the door to the room open a crack and I stand there indecisively for a moment, then the door opens wider and Flip is standing in front of me. “Welllll, Dikschei, come in, come in.” He is wearing a very respectable old suit, blue serge, a little threadbare, and a very respectable shirt, dark blue stripes, with a matching collar, workingman’s quality though, cheap cotton.

That room. Small, dark, two windows looking out at the railroad embankment with a big sign on it, MUIDERPOORT, and some snow still there, no longer white, and a tall rusty fence with pointed

posts running along its base. Dull brown curtains make the room very dark, at least there are no screens. Someone is shuffling right past the windows outside, there are little bits of trash on the street. A large cylindrical heater fills the room but the room is chilly anyway. The little space left is taken up by a table and six chairs. A dull brown tablecloth makes the room even darker. The six chairs look like kitchen chairs that somehow managed to get ahead in the world at one point but have since fallen behind again. The wide wooden frames holding the wicker, with knobs on top, try in vain to recall their once-high position but all they do is remind you of the cheap furniture store in the Dapperplein area, filled to bursting, where they were bought.

The chairs, the chill, the years without work, on welfare. The cramped space and the half dark and the railroad running past.

This is not even the valley of obligations. This is a pit. I look up from below at the back of God's head. If I stayed here long it would seem like I'd never seen anything of God except the back of his head.

We sit at the table. Flip in his threadbare suit, with *Ideas* by Multatuli and an open composition book in front of him. Otherwise the table is empty. The whole room is grimly straightened up. There is a big framed photograph on the wall, under glass: Flip himself, his hairstyle, his eyebrows, the same features, the mustache, but a shirt with an old-fashioned wing collar and a thin black bowtie. And it's not Flip after all—it's someone ten years younger at least, with something in his nature that I can't quite put my finger on: someone who knows what's what. Flip sees me looking and turns partly around in his chair. "My father." "Oh, yes, of course." He reads my thoughts immediately and laughs: "You thought it was me? 1905. By now I'm probably old enough to be *his* father." His smile gets broader, wider than I've seen it recently. "My father had a good business, lead- and tinsmith. Nowadays they'd call it an 'enterprise,' like the Germans do, it sounds more distinguished to the hoi polloi. You never met him? No, you never came over to our house back then. I'll show you my mother."

He disappears into the back of the house. The connecting door stays open a crack behind him and I can see into a dark alcove where a low bed is barely visible. When he comes back he leaves the door open a crack. There is a bit more light in the alcove, there must be another door open a crack on the other side.

A photograph, "cabinet format," only slightly faded. A young woman from the 1880s, *en face*, her whole neck encased in a stiff collar with three little buttons in front and a narrow lace border sticking out of the top, a ruche that frames her face from below. High, noble forehead; big, lovely eyes. A miraculous rebirth of life in this pit of hopelessness. Nothing in Flip is like her except his eyes, his nearsighted eyes like a faithful dog's. I can't stop looking at the picture. Why isn't this woman here the way I see her before me? Why did she change, and then die, so long ago?

That forehead, those eyes: Insula Dei. There it is. While I'm looking Flip starts reading again with his forehead resting on his hands. *Ideas* by Multatuli, a cousin of the wing collar. But *she* is alive. Beneath that hairstyle and behind that pince-nez she lives on, in the peculiar external shape of a cocky lead- and tinsmith.

I wait until Flip looks up. "What's that notebook, are you writing again?" He blushes. By God, the sixty-year-old cocky lead- and tin-smith blushes. "I'm doing something totally crazy." He hesitates and I don't press him. "I got the idea after we met." I wait. He studies my face, I think he wants to know if I'm really the kind of person he thinks I am. "I'm making a list of all the cafés we went to in those twenty years, and all the hotels where we stayed." And sure enough, he blushes again. "It's a great thing to do, everything comes back to you. The whole geography of the Netherlands, Belgium,

northern France, the German Lower Rhine.

I hold out my hand but he shakes his head. "Not yet. I'll show you something else."

He has brought out another photograph. "Liza." His wife. A child's eyes, a lively, delicate nose, a sweet mouth. And another: two small children, between two and three years old maybe, standing next to a chair, each with a little hand on the seat, in truth I see only their foreheads and surprised eyes. They have their grandmother's forehead and eyes. *Insula Dei*.

I wait. "Dead," he says, "all dead. TB. She died in '35. Even in '34 I didn't realize how bad it was. A person can really be stupid, when God decides that he shouldn't be worried about something. I thought she was over it for good. She was complaining about tiredness again, and sometimes the smallest thing made her burst into tears, but I had no idea that anything would go wrong, much less for good. We had a wonderful time together that year in Saint-Georges."

"Saint-Georges?"

"Saint-Georges-les-Bains, Département de l'Ardèche, le Vivarais, right by the Rhône, right bank, about ten miles from Valence. Population three hundred, a 'spa' in a tiny little river. Almost no one there. No real hotels, just three bars, with climbing vines, nice places to have a drink but you can't stay there. Everything a bit dirty, except for the 'Château.' The Salvation Army had set up a children's summer camp there and they let a few guests stay there in the off-season, by special arrangement. At least they did *then*. My wife had a friend who worked for the Salvation Army in Paris, that's how we ended up there. Cheap, decent, not the most private. We lived like kings, high up, a few miles from the Rhône, with a magnificent view over the broad valley with mountains rising up again in the distance. A large house, a spacious regal 'perron' with a stone balustrade, old-style French columns, and two stone staircases, a large terrace in front with trees and benches and a balustrade of its own, a semicircle at the edge of the cliff. Almost regal steps zigzag down the mountain from the Château to the gardens. It's like the view from the Westerbouwing but everything is bigger, and instead of Nijmegen with its little hills you have the start of the Alps, far away, mostly hazy. And the Rhône in the landscape, and lots of trees, lots of pointed poplars, fields in many different shades of green, and little houses, grand but at the same time flowery and charming, now and then a train in the distance. Reminiscent of Montferland sometimes, of the view from the hotel there, the Cleve towers could have been on the mountains opposite. The river was the life in it. A landscape without water is a blind landscape; water is like an eye."

While he is talking he has put his elbows back on the table and rested his forehead in his hands and he looks at the table. And so, in that godforsaken pit, he keeps talking, in a monotone, talking to himself. And the sun is shining on a vast, warm landscape and God's warm smile lies over everything.

The voice keeps talking.

"She came back to life. Every day I could see her reviving. We took walks if it wasn't too hot, it was in June, but mostly she just liked to look, she got to know the fields, the trees, the houses, the mountain-tops in the distance. It was warm, on June 18 they started mowing the hay. The real South starts sixty miles farther, where there are olive trees, but there were figs there already, on the trees, and not just trees in fenced-in orchards but out in the fields, just here and there.

"And flowers. Camellias, honeysuckle, jasmine. Linden blossom. Everything saturated with fantastic smells. And crickets, and frogs. Little lizards everywhere. And there was a cuckoo there too, one cuckoo, *our* cuckoo. There was so much. The river wound downhill in the valley, between trees and shrubs. More of a creek, actually. The Turzon. From above you could only see the trees and shrubs.

“She recovered completely. The journey there was exhausting but she recovered completely. Her cheeks were rosy like a child’s again. And she was so grateful, and loved the countryside so much. The fields, the trees, the flowers, the houses, the Rhône, our cuckoo— they were her friends. She said good morning to them every day and good night every evening.

“Where else have I ever stayed in a place like that? Other than in Veere, 1908 and 1910, at De Campveerse Toren. On one side, the Château borders nothing, it’s surrounded in back by the woods, a little path connects it to the road so there’s no traffic, and even the road isn’t busy. So high up that you’re closer to our dear Lord. In a place with no noise, no billboards, no attractions, no radio. Just think about all the miserable guesthouses and furnished vacation rentals in the world and the abject horror of needing to leave such places and then return to them, with all the miserable human stuff there that makes you ashamed before our dear Lord.”

Typical Flip. He thinks about his wife and sees a landscape. It really is absurd that he never wrote anything after that one book, which in truth was nothing exceptional; it wasn’t personal enough, *him* enough, it was too much in the style of the time. After so many years he sits mumbling in his pit with his slightly disgusting hair-style and he gushes like a fountain, a whole landscape shoots up into the air and a whole countryside is conjured up in front of you.

He is sitting half turned toward me again, a little slumped to the left on the arm of his chair, toward the table.

“When we came home she was dead tired again and six weeks later we knew that something was really wrong. I’ve often thought that I shouldn’t have let her take that trip. But that’s how it always was: I got it into my head that I wanted to get away, I had to try somewhere else. Two weeks before her second child was due I was in Veere. Always the same. I couldn’t be any other way. Now I know that I was always looking for that damned island. God knows what I’ve selfishly trampled on all these years, always searching, always looking up at the clouds.

“And she never held me back. She herself sent me away when she couldn’t come along: ‘Go see how it is there, then come tell me.’ And the letters she wrote me. I still know a couple of them by heart.

“‘You’re having a great time there, hmm? I’m glad. If only I could have some fun here too, it’s so dreary, I want so badly for it to just be over, it gets so boring, the same aches and pains every day. I’m sure you’ll have so much to tell me when you get back. Liesje is so sweet, she’s getting a lot of fresh air.’

“‘I expected you to be back home all this week, actually, especially on Friday. At midnight I was still awake, wishing the whole time that you’d still come, but I was wrong. No, Liza, Papa’s having too much fun. Write me something? a postcard or two at least?’

“She died the same year we went to Saint-Georges. It was beyond my understanding. I still can’t talk about it. When I try to think about it, even *now*, I still just see a big black chasm I have no words for.”

Silence. God’s island floats solitary and abandoned. Now all there is is the pit and the tracks across the street.

“There are so many things I did wrong,” he says. “Who hasn’t?” I ask.

He props his elbows on his knees, props his head on his hands again, and looks at me like that. Then he shakes his head: “No, not just some things. I did everything wrong. And treated people badly. And why? For nothing, for a figment of the imagination.”

“A figment of the imagination?” I say. “Is there anything else in life?”

But he looks at the floor. The black chasm holds him fast.

He seems old now, ravaged and bedraggled. God's incomprehensibility is too much for him. I think about myself. Will it really all turn out to have been a mistake?

He stares at the floor and I stand next to him and look down at the shiny, threadbare back of his jacket. "In a month the crocuses will be in bloom," I say. He looks up at me. Then, suddenly, he's standing up and sticking his head out into the hall. "Mie, you're burning the milk again."

When I'm back outside I see, across the street, next to the fence, here in this slum, in the grimy slush, two German naval officers.

February 7–12, 1942

(CONTINUED)

There is yet *another* section of "Insula Dei" that tells how Dikschei made love with Helena den Oever, Flip's niece and the spitting image of her grandmother.

But that section is absolutely not appropriate for publication. In any case, you can imagine it perfectly well for yourself without much difficulty if you care to remember how you yourself have made love. And if you're a couple who still get along well, you will look at each other and she'll lower her eyes and you won't find your thoughts unpleasant or dishonorable in the least.

You might well have also found it pleasant to read that section. But even so, I'd rather leave it out. I know these cultured, fine, up-standing men and women who would never let themselves go as far as bestial behavior, the ones who like to call themselves and each other Society. I know them. I can already hear what they'd say, already read the little articles they'd publish, if this lovemaking—the wild and tender human passion that drives us all, more than we even realize—went on sale one day in the bookstore, just like that.

I thank you. So as not to think about the impervious entity called the State. Or a group of friends among themselves. Or the way my friend Bonnema would sputter and make faces if he read it.

I will just have to wait until our civilization finally develops a noble frankness and candor once again.

Which I say so that you'll think I imagine I'll live forever.

February 13, 1942

[1] *Vereenigde Amsterdamsche Melkinrichtingen*: Amsterdam United Dairy Federation. [Trans.]

NOTES

NESCIO published three books in his lifetime, barely. The stories generally recognized as his major works—"The Freeloader," "Young Titans," and "Little Poet"—were first published in book form, after a relatively long hunt for a publisher, in 1918 ("The Freeloader" and "Young Titans" had previously appeared in magazines). The book was not a commercial success, with a first printing of five hundred copies and a second edition coming only in 1933, from a different publisher, and a third in 1947. In 1942, Nescio assembled a manuscript of unpublished pieces dating back as far as 1913; five of those stories, plus a very short sixth piece from 1943, were published as his second book, *Mene Tekel*, in 1946 (later combined with the fourth edition of "The Freeloader," "Young Titans," and "Little Poet" in 1956). Finally, the book *Boven het dal* [*Above the Valley*] appeared in May 1961: an unusual compilation consisting of the 1942 manuscript, including the stories previously published in *Mene Tekel*, plus seven additional unpublished stories selected by an editorial committee. Nescio had little direct involvement in putting together the volume and died very soon after its publication, on July 25, 1961. Nescio's *Collected Works* appeared in two substantial volumes in 1996, with the second volume containing the Nature Diary he kept of his frequent excursions in Holland from 1946 to 1955. The Nature Diary was a revelation to Dutch readers and the edition was a great success.

The present volume contains all of Nescio's major work and a representative selection of his other fiction, both published and unpublished during his lifetime. The stories appear in chronological order of their writing, not their publication. "The Writing on the Wall" and "Out Along the IJ" are from *Mene Tekel*; "The Valley of Obligations" and "Insula Dei" are from *Above the Valley*. For "From an Unfinished Novel" and "The End," see the notes below.

THE FREELOADER

Dutch title: "*De uitvreter*," sometimes translated as "The Mooch" or "The Sponger," literally someone who eats up everything you've got. The narrator's name, "Koekebakker," literally "cookie baker," means an inept or silly bungler; Grönloh wanted to use Koekebakker as his pseudonym, but *De Gids* (the magazine where "The Freeloader" was first published) may have objected—in any case he decided on Nescio. "Koekebakker" is pronounced roughly "Coo-cuh-bocker"; "Japi" is pronounced "Yoppy."

YOUNG TITANS

Dutch title: "*Titaantjes*," literally "Little Titans," sometimes translated as "Little Giants" or "Young Turks." The diminutive "-tje" is very widely used in Dutch (including in the title "Little Poet") and thus has a wide range of connotations besides size: affection, condescension, camaraderie, nostalgia, sarcasm, and so on.

"J'ai attendu le Seigneur avec une grande patience, enfin il s'est abaissé jusqu'à moi": "I waited patiently for the Lord, and he inclined unto me [and heard my cry]," the beginning of Psalm 40, quoted in French from Frederik van Eeden's 1900 novel *Van de koele meeren des doods* (I thank Sam de Groot for the reference).

"Per me si va nella città dolente" and "Per me si va tra la perduta gente": "Through me you enter the city of woe ... Through me you enter to join the lost." Lines inscribed on the Gates of Hell in Dante's *Inferno*, Canto III, lines 1 and 3.

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

Dutch title: “*Mene Tekel*.” “Mene, Mene, Tekel, Uparshin” are the words that appear on Belshazzar’s palace wall in the Book of Daniel (5:1–30): Daniel interprets “Mene” to mean “God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end,” and “Tekel” to mean “You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.” This episode is the origin of the phrase “the writing on the wall” in English.

OUT ALONG THE IJ

Dutch title: “*Buiten-IJ*,” the geographical feature (literally “Outer IJ”) at the center of the story. The IJ, the river which widens into the harbor in Amsterdam—like “ij” any time it appears in Dutch—is pronounced roughly like “eye.”

LITTLE POET

Dutch title: “*Dichtertje*.” The story was written remarkably quickly for Nescio—in this case, the date he gave at the end, “June–July 1917,” was his entire period of composition.

“*Bellum transit, amor manet*”: Latin: “War passes, love remains” (cf. “Tempus fugit, amor manet”).

“*Der Tüchtigkeit ist die Welt*”: German: “Competence is everything.”

“*Mon âme prend son élan vers l’infini*”: French: “My soul takes flight toward infinity.”

“*C’est là, c’est là qu’il faut être. Là?*”: French: “There, it has to be there. There?” A slightly altered quotation from the aria based on Goethe’s “Mignon’s Song” in the opera *Mignon*: “*C’est là! c’est là que je voudrais vivre*” [“There, there is where I want to live”].

“*Ins grosse Vaterland*”: German: “[Leading] into the great fatherland.”

“*Consummatum est*”: “It is finished.” Christ’s words as he was dying on the cross, in the Latin Vulgate.

FROM AN UNFINISHED NOVEL

After “Little Poet” (1917), Nescio wrote little that satisfied him until “Insula Dei” (1942). The selection here consists of some of the surviving drafts of what he apparently intended as a longer piece but abandoned—it should thus not be seen as an actual work by Nescio, and is included in this volume to give a sense of the style and content of his efforts during this long period. (The title is not Nescio’s.)

The only part of the selection here that Nescio published was paragraphs six and seven (“We sat outside ...” through “... reflections in the IJ”), which he extracted in 1942 and included among the fragments that would eventually be published in *Above the Valley* in 1961. There it is prefaced with the following note:

And I include this piece, since it would please me greatly to think that you too can’t get enough of Amsterdam. It is from 1918. Untitled.

The first section of “From an Unfinished Novel,” until the break, is Nescio’s first draft. The minor corrections Nescio made in 1942 to paragraphs six and seven are incorporated. The last five paragraphs contain new material from his final known revision (before the 1942 reclamation), which Nescio dated October 13, 1918, and titled “De Profundis” (Latin for “From the depths,” from Psalm 130: “Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord”).

THE VALLEY OF OBLIGATIONS

Dutch title: “*Het dal der plichten*.” This is the first story from the 1961 collection *Above the Valley*, used as a quasi–title story and preface (it is followed by Nescio’s “Introduction” to the volume).

All the manuscript copies up to a certain stage have an additional sentence in the first paragraph, after “Some of them look up every once in a while and then they scream”: “Those are the lucky ones.” It is not clear whether Nescio omitted the sentence intentionally or accidentally; the Dutch edition gives it in a note, not in the text itself.

THE END

Dutch title: “*Het Einde*.” A fragment unpublished in Nescio’s lifetime, written December 14, 1937 (he retired at the end of December, 1937). He wrote a somewhat separate Part II of “The End,” dated almost two weeks later (December 27, 1937), which is not translated here.

The editor of the Dutch *Collected Works*, Lienneke Frerichs, argues that Nescio’s rereading of “The End,” to decide whether to include it in his 1942 manuscript, inspired both the content and structure of “Insula Dei”: the opening conversation between two men; the “five things worth bothering about” as underlying the five sections of the later story (with the continuation section possibly added to include more of the erotic element, the one least emphasized in the story); several passages included directly in the later story.

INSULA DEI

The only long work Nescio completed after his first three major stories. Clearly the writing of the story was an unexpected, greatly welcome side effect of compiling the 1942 manuscript that eventually served as the basis for *Above the Valley*: the “Introduction” to *Above the Valley*, dated “January 29–February 1, 1942,” ends with Nescio saying that “he has hereby put his papers in order, as though he were in fact already dead”—but is then followed by a short Part II dated February 12, 1942, beginning: “And then just like that here is another story. It turned out rather different than I’d thought.” The story itself is dated precisely to the six days February 7–12, 1942 (continuation on February 13).

“Insula Dei” is Latin for “Island of God” and a term sometimes used to refer to monasteries or abbeys.

[“The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing”](#): Ecclesiastes 1:8.

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